

RONALD

By
May Crommelin



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BAY RONALD.

VOL. II.

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BY

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‘QUEENIE,’ ‘ORANGE LILY,’ ‘MISS DAISY DIMITY,’
‘IN THE WEST COUNTRIE,’ ETC., ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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BAY RONALD.

CHAPTER I.

It was a June evening, and they two were leaning over the gate of the hill meadow, mother and son.

The June was in them, also, with all its sweetness; the glory of blue skies and singing larks, of fresh, green woods, new-sprung grass, innumerable subtle scents from hedgerows and copses, perfuming the meads and thymy banks.

It was one of those delicious twilight evenings when all the earth seems very good, and our hearts expand with love

towards the great brotherhood of human kind ; the throbbing life ocean of which we are all drops. On such an evening, even should we be old and grey, if generous blood has once pulsed through our veins in springtime it will grow warm again sharing the general gladness of the earth.

But an if one be a man, young, strong, and two-and-twenty, with curling hair like a mop of gold, a merry sunburnt face, laughing teeth, and a soft down of coming beard upon the cheeks ; then little wonder if—besides a large-hearted warmth of well-wishing towards everyone—there shall leap a sacred flame in the inner temple of the heart. A fire has been lit upon its altar, that he, its high priest, vows shall never die while he lives.

Dick was in love. He felt its delicious pain, its agony of delight as trembling

hopes or fond fears prevailed. This was the one thought that possessed him when he withdrew from the workaday world into his inner sanctuary. Outwardly he was occupied by a hundred daily matters that were fairly engrossing to which he gave due attention, but in farmyard or meadow-work, in shirt-sleeves among his men, or, as now, enjoying a rest and a quiet chat in the twilight with his mother, love surrounded him like an invisible cloud. He breathed it, he felt it, he saw things present and future through its rosy mist, and his heart was glad.

So now he said,

‘There are just three living creatures on this earth that in my eyes could not have been created better. You are the first one, mother, and the colt, Bay Ronald over there, is another——’

Dick hesitated, but although his heart

was open no more speech came from between his parted lips.

‘ And Lucy Jennings is the third, my son ; and not the least.’

The mother’s renunciating smile when she first knows that her son’s heart is no longer all her own, beautified Mrs. Saxby’s features. She looked at Dick fondly, some self-regret making a passing shadow in her eyes, then maternal love prevailing and shining brightly.

These past years of a quiet yet busy life of peacefulness, as her son grew from boyhood to manhood, had strengthened and sweetened Catherine’s character. Her thick hair was streaked with grey, her tall figure had lost some of its former beauty of outline, for she had grown stouter and heavier with time. There were small wrinkles betokening housekeeper’s cares on her oval face besides the deep lines

traced by old sorrow, though her large black eyes retained much of their old fire. How different from the former toast of Kent and heiress of Rookhurst! Yet, if needed, the words of the son of Sirach might be applied to Catherine Saxby, 'As a clear light is on the holy candlestick; so is the beauty of a face in ripe age.'

With such an unselfishly loving expression she now looked sideways at Dick. But he, his arms crossed on the topmost bar of the gate, blushed consciously and watched Bay Ronald, the pride of his eyes, that was grazing at some distance. Through the evening mists the colt's shape looked dim, hardly recognizable, yet in the silence they could hear him cropping the juicy herbage.

'I know I am right, Dick. There is no need for you to speak. I can read what is in your mind.'

‘There is not much in it hidden from you, mother. Nothing, certainly, that you have a right to know.’

‘I am sure of it; thank God that he has given me the blessing of a good son to be a consolation in my latter years.’

Catherine’s voice shook just a little with emotion.

She and Dick raised their heads by mute consent, and their eyes met full. It was a grave, trustful glance on her part, an affectionate smiling one on that of Dick. Ah, his mother had almost forgotten how to smile, at least lost the habit of doing so easily years ago. Still Dick knew that she was very contented in her heart as both silently turned away. Catherine took her boy’s arm, which this last year or two she had begun to do, saying she was no longer active. The truth was she liked to lean upon her son’s young strength, both in mind and body.

‘Wait a minute,’ said Dick, suddenly be-
thinking himself, ‘I believe it would be
well to take the colt in to-night. There
were some tramps hanging about the lane
this afternoon, two of them begging up at
The Laurels, and this field is conveniently
placed for such gentry.’

He opened the gate as he spoke, then
gave a peculiar whistle like the cry of a
curlew. At the first sound the colt left off
grazing and raised his head. At the second
call he came galloping at full speed, his
hoofs sounding with a dull thud, thud, on
the grass and a click on the stones till he
pulled up short in the lane where his
master stood. Only that Catherine drew
quickly to one side, he might have knocked
her down.

‘Very cleverly done,’ said a third voice
quietly close behind. The new-comer who
appeared in this slightly startling manner
was Captain Ratcliffe, approaching with

noiseless steps on the grass skirting the hedge. 'Very good indeed! you manage that colt capitally, Dick. How are you, Mrs. Saxby? I have just strolled down for the pleasure of spending half an hour in your company, if you will allow me the privilege.'

'Bay Ronald is a Christian,' said Dick, proudly taking his favourite by the ear and leading him homeward towards the stables. 'Why, he plays with a ball in his manger, captain, for an hour at a time, tossing it about as a child might. Then he can nuzzle almost any latch up, or bolt back, and used to get out of his loose box and walk about visiting the other horses, telling them what fools they were. Here, Mike,' as they came into the yard, 'I've done your work for you and caught the youngster.'

'It is a work that wastes my time,' re-

sponded Mike Lee, with a large grin. This lad was a younger brother to Black Jim, and lately taken on at the farm to see after the horses. 'Look at him now, a picter of goodness just like a lamb ; and yesterday evening I spent near an hour tempting him with carrots, and he eat them all, he did, every one, but never allowed me to lay so much as a finger upon him.'

'He is a picture, isn't he?' said Dick, admiringly.

Dick felt more full of friendship than ever to old Rat as the latter, with legs wide apart and hands behind his back, stood for some time passing the colt's points in careful review and bestowing praises with nice discrimination.

Bay Ronald was now a three-year old, about fifteen-one in height ; in colour a bright bay. He had a short back ; was well ribbed up, with fine sloping shoulders, and

rather a narrow chest, denoting speed perhaps more than strength. For such a youngster he had great girth, while his quarters were 'Irish,' his hind legs being well under him, and these same strong clean legs together with the best of feet well able to withstand the king's highway.

'Yes, he's good,' ended Captain Rat. 'Look at his sensible eye. His jaw is a trifle coarse, maybe. No odds: that will improve as he gets older.'

'Ah,' cried Dick, gleefully, 'he will do. Watch him now! A bad horse, as they say, never swung his tail.' As Dick spoke, Mike led the young'un to the stable, Bay Ronald stepping well into his own tracks, his tail swaying from side to side, as he strode away.

'Well, I wish we had his match,' put in Catherine. 'It is a pity to have your eggs in one basket, Dick.'

‘Come, mother, more cattle more care, as the other proverb says. One must be happy with what one has got, and I don’t envy Richie his stables full at Rookhurst while I have the best three-year old in the country.’

‘You have the best horse, Dick, and your mother has the best son.’ So Ratcliffe neatly rounded the discussion, bowing with a chivalrous air to Catherine.

Dick laughed at that, and went to lock he stable door himself.

‘What a picture *he* is!’ said Ratcliffe, then, in a lower voice into the mother’s flattered ear.

Her heart warmed, Catherine hospitably asked the captain to come indoors and stay to supper with them. Dick, who was listening, duly backed this, but his face fell despite himself, and looking down to hide discomfiture he flicked his boots with a switch he carried.

‘ You are both very kind,’ said Ratcliffe, in a peculiarly gentle tone, studying Dick’s expression out of the corner of his eye. ‘ The truth is I felt lonely, for my niece Lucy has gone to see her friends the Pollocks. They have some little festivity there this evening, Mr. Sam having just come down from London. What a dull youth he is, by the way, eh, Dick? It would take ten of him to make a man like you. Then I might have gone down to Rookhurst, it is true; but, dear madam, your cousin there has grown so peevish in his moods, is, in fact, so discontented a man that I do not feel he will be very good company.’

‘ Yet,’ said Catherine, musingly, ‘ in the world’s eyes he has succeeded in most of his wishes.’

Good woman though she was, it was not wholly displeasing to Catherine that

Philip Saxby should be held a disappointed man. Retribution seemed only just; she believed she had forgiven him, but can anyone forget a painful past? As he had sown, it was right he should reap.

‘Still he has his son back,’ she went on, quickly, trying to disguise this feeling in her heart; or perhaps, with woman’s inquisitiveness, seeking to know if Richie was in any way the cause of his father’s discontent.

‘Yes, he has Richie home, and a fairly well-mannered young fellow too, though a little mincing in his deportment,’ answered Ratcliffe, assuming a tone of utter impartiality. ‘Oh yes, young Richie has just come back after a tour round all the kingdom. He has even been up to Scotland, and travelled in the Highlands. Besides that, he has visited almost every watering-place in England. At Bath last season he

was one of the most constant attendants in the Assembly Rooms, so my Lucy told me, whilst she was there under the care of Madame Dupré. No, no, I do not suppose that Philip Saxby has any reason to be displeased with his son.' (Catherine started, for Ratcliffe had divined her secret thoughts.) 'Nevertheless, they are of different minds, and do not always hit it off together.'

In this way the 'old turncoat,' as he was still called by the country people, ingratiated himself in Mrs. Saxby's favour. So while Catherine never doubted that he was a true friend to herself, she could not be offended by his even more close intimacy with Philip, whom he often described as soured and lonely, for she believed it was simply Ratcliffe's nature to try and act as general mediator, himself keeping on good terms with everyone.

‘ And Madame Dupré ?’ she asked, in a constrained tone of voice, ‘ has she gone with Lucy as usual to act duenna ?’

‘ Yes, of course. I have never approved of young ladies being allowed to go to parties without proper caretakers ; or to run about the country like our merry little friends the Miss Pollocks, in company of any of the young militia officers. After Lucy left school I felt, my dear madam, that as she could not be always under your care, kind though you invariably are to my niece, so it was better she should have some one in the house on whose discretion and guardianship she could better rely than on that of her rough old uncle,’ returned Ratcliffe, with much earnestness. ‘ I considered myself very fortunate in being able to secure the services of a lady by birth ; an *émigrée* of good old family, as I happen personally to know, and I trust,

my dear friend, that I have your approval in this matter.'

Mrs. Saxby coughed significantly, feeling slightly embarrassed.

'Madame Dupré certainly looks after Lucy very closely.'

'Just what I wish,' briskly. 'Lucy never takes a single walk without proper supervision, with my consent. Not that I ever restrict her freedom, you understand; but perhaps an old sailor is more careful about women-folk than those who are better used to them.'

'I believe so,' returned Mrs. Saxby, with spirit, 'and I do not see that it would hurt Lucy to come down the lane and spend an hour or so occasionally with an old friend like me. Not that I am saying a word against Madame Dupré's society, but I have known Lucy from her babyhood, and I feel towards her——'

Catherine broke off short, she was going to say 'like a mother,' but substituted 'like a god-mother.'

'Quite so, quite so. She shall come, oh, she shall come. I will speak to madame myself about it.'

CHAPTER II.

WHILE the foregoing conversation took place, Mrs. Saxby and her guest had entered the sitting-room and mounted the steps to its raised end.

Dick, however, lagged behind and stayed in the lower part of the room, his shoulders just overtopping the balustrade of the quaint daïs by which he stood, leaning his head on his hand.

Ratcliffe's keen eyes again watched his young friend with interest, but perceiving this scrutiny Dick turned away sharply and began caressing his two terriers Flint and Spark, so that only the top of a golden head could be seen.

Madame Dupré, it may here be explained, had been established in charge of Captain Ratcliffe's household in general, and of Miss Jennings in particular, since a year. After that party at The Laurels, which secretly decided Ratcliffe to send his niece back to school for another couple of terms, Lucy was brought into society at seventeen, being introduced by her uncle at the Assembly Rooms of Tunbridge Wells. There they came across an *émigrée* French lady, who in former days used to be well acquainted with Captain Ratcliffe in France. Both renewed their friendship quickly, it appeared, the upshot being that when the captain and his niece returned to The Laurels, Madame Dupré came also in her present capacity. She was snowy-haired, powder lending its aid to heighten the silvery hue of her tresses. But this was summer snow, many declared, and the

lady's air of middle-aged dignity somewhat assumed, for her comely figure if too plump was active, even elastic, her black eyes sparkled with vivacity, and her face was still red-lipped and smooth in complexion.

Dick rather liked madame, who had a saucy way of flattering him, as indeed she had with most men, and the latter generally shared his opinion. This they uttered privately amongst each other, however, for almost all the ladies in the neighbourhood, and among them Mrs. Saxby, looked slightly askance at the easy-mannered, well-dressed new-comer. Miss Murdoch expressed the secret feeling by tartly remarking that after never having been talked about with any woman for years back it was odd that Captain Ratcliffe should take this particular time to give occasion for gossip when his niece had just been introduced.

The other ladies felt, however, that this was speaking too strongly.

Captain Ratcliffe, they reminded her, might have made a mistake from over-anxious care of his niece's interests. But one and all fully exonerated the honest sailor from entertaining the slightest doubt as to Madame Dupré's fitness for her present post. Whatever her past had possibly been, as they pointedly remarked to each other, he, poor man! could easily be deceived. They might have their doubts (this bridling) still no one could say anything excepting that madame's manners were hardly those, they should imagine, of the Faubourg St. Germain. Men, as all the world knows, are excellent judges of their own kind, but when it comes to a pretty woman—(the ladies smiled and shrugged their shoulders).

To return to the little party at Forge Farm.

‘Do you recollect this very evening last year, madam? Gad! it is the very same one when we three were together and heard the news of Vittoria. Do you remember?’ cried Rat.

They did so, for just as now all three stood in the farm parlour. Through the window which was open there came the sounds of coach wheels and cheers borne upon the evening breeze growing stronger and stronger.

‘Listen! What is that? What are they calling?’ cried Dick, rushing to the door. ‘Is it victory?’

The others followed him outside into the garden, and looked eagerly over the low wall along the high-road. The ‘Rocket’ coach from London was just swinging round the corner, but the coachman took a pull at his horses and brought all four up short with heaving sides and steaming

breath before the door, where a little crowd of villagers had already come up running from the hamlet.

‘Huzza! Huzza! Victory! A great victory at Vittoria,’ burst from the throats of a dozen passengers at once.

The coach was decorated with laurel leaves, hats were waving, handkerchiefs flying, and answering hurrahs broke from the spectators below, among whom Dick’s voice rose loudest. Then the coachman touched up his horses, and away they went again to rattle through other villages and stop for a breathless half minute to tell the news.

‘How I wish I had been a soldier; yes, or a sailor. Anything to see some fighting!’ breathed Dick, from the bottom of his heart.

Ratcliffe turned and looked at the lad’s shining eyes and heightened colour.

‘It is a pity. A young fellow like you would come to the front in next to no time,’ he said, with more than his usual readiness to agree with the sentiments of everyone.

‘Hush, hush!’ Catherine laid her hand upon his arm. ‘Remember he is my only son, and I am a widow.’

Dick hung his head, then said low,

‘But for remembering that, mother, I should have gone long ago.’

It was the same year when Lucy Jennings was sent back to school, when also Dick had an inkling in his inmost mind that Captain Ratcliffe reflected his pretty Lucy was destined to be an heiress, while Dick himself was not much better than a common farmer. And yet had Ratcliffe ever meant it so? It was impossible to say, for no one could be more friendly, even fatherly, in his manner towards young

Saxby, wherefore Dick felt from the depths of his honest heart if Ratcliffe was against his suit it would not be for want of personal liking, but out of conviction that he was acting for the best.

To return from the date of Vittoria to the evening we are describing.

Presently Dr. Butler and his daughter Anne dropped in from the rectory, as often happened ; and they too stayed for supper as old friends should ; and were reminded of the anniversary.

‘ Yes,’ said the rector, echoing Ratcliffe’s memory of two years ago, ‘ who would have thought then that this year should see the allied sovereigns in London, and happy peace crowning all our struggles.’

Dick and Anne sat a little apart from the elders, which was natural enough.

Anne was very happy, telling the good news of how one of her many brothers

had got a scholarship at last ; also that the old peahen had brought out its brood, although she, Anne, often feared the eggs were addled. (Indeed, on this point Dick used to frighten her by pretending he had boiled them on the sly one morning early, while the peahen took some matutinal exercise in the dewy grass.) And Dick, lying comfortably back in a capacious chair, with his eyes half-closed, laughed sleepily and chaffed, entering with hearty good fellowship into both her causes of pleasure. It would not have been easy to guess—good Anne never did so—that he was really on thorns, burning with impatience for the moment when the company should all depart.

The guests went away together, and Dick accompanied them. But at The Laurels he made a pretext to take leave of Dr. Butler and Anne, and stepped

through the iron gates still talking to the captain.

‘ Well, good-night, my boy,’ and Ratcliffe yawned dolefully. ‘ I must turn in now, and mean to have a big sleep ; I am dead tired. Old age coming on, I suppose ; I am not the man I was, that’s certain.’

‘ You can ride round most of us yet, captain. You, old ! what nonsense ! Why, if you had a bow window like Mr. Falconer one might believe you. Well, good-night Ha, ha—good-night.’

Dick had given one glance at an upper casement of the house just after speaking rather loudly.

The sudden cheeriness of the young fellow’s departure surprised Ratcliffe, who stood still with the door open till Dick’s figure disappeared and his departing whistle sounded down the lane.

‘Now what the devil——?’

Rat stepped softly on to the grass and studied Lucy’s window overhead, where a candle was set inside on the broad ledge. Nothing more to be seen, so after some cogitation her uncle softly re-entered the house reassuring himself.

‘Poor fool! What a fine lad he is too! So the mere sight of her light sent up his spirits forty degrees at a bound. That must have been it. What it is to be young and in love! I could find it in my heart to let him have her after all, instead of that mincing jackanapes his cousin. But there! no use in giving way to sentiment.’

And meanwhile Dick was trudging homewards with a light heart. For Lucy had set her candle in the first window behind the fourth pane, and he understood the signal.

CHAPTER III.

THE following morning about four o'clock the sun was just piercing through the soft night-mist that lately enwrapped the sleeping landscape, dew-drops were glistening on every grass blade, and the birds were singing madly from woods and thickets.

Early though it was, Lucy Jennings was standing alone in a quiet leafy hollow not far from the back of her uncle's house. She had dressed in haste, it seemed, for her wide straw hat was loosely tied above her hair gathered high in a single knot. Also she was in an attitude of expectancy, for her rosy lips were parted and her head

slightly inclined, as if listening to catch some special sound through the exultant twittering, piping, and trilling of the feathered choir around.

Not yet; she had not heard it yet. Without stirring from the spot her slight figure stood, as if in arrested motion, poised lightly on her arched insteps, that seemed ready to spring forward next instant.

How the birds sang! they shrilled through the listening girl's ears in higher, higher, still higher melody, as if their small feathered bodies must almost burst with mad gladness but for this out-pouring of song. Yes, they were all happy as happy could be, and a dawning kindred happiness, just held in check by expectancy, brightened Lucy's eyes.

She was looking intently upwards at a reddish cliff some twenty feet high encircling the hollow. It was topped by tall

beech-trees overhead, where a wall was also built, perhaps to protect what had formerly been a quarry. Down below Lucy was standing in a grassy cart-track with a thick copse on either side. The track was rarely used, though it led to three strong wooden doors set in the cliff base which slightly spoiled the aspect of woodland seclusion of this lovers' trysting-place. For these were Captain Ratcliffe's coal and wood cellars, to which use he had turned some natural deep hollows in the rock. They were reserve stores, merely filled when coal was at its lowest summer price, and little called upon. It was seldom therefore that anyone came here, and there was no more retired spot or one so free from possible observation for two miles around.

Now a rustle of branches sounded overhead. Lucy clasped her hands slightly and gazed up.

Then a man's figure, that of Dick Saxby, appeared in a beech-tree above the wall. He caught a bough, swung himself over, and holding by both hands jumped cautiously on to a small grassy ledge, lining one spot of the inner side of the wall ; the only foothold to be seen along its base. Next minute he began climbing down the cliff side in breakneck haste by help of the sand-martins' holes with which it was thickly burrowed, while the startled birds circled round in fluttering flight, and piping outcries came from callow broods within. Now he was clinging half-way down, his fingers dug in the upper holes, his toes searching for fresh coigns of vantage.

'To the right, Dick ; there !' called Lucy, low and anxiously. 'That is it, *now*.'

At her signal the climber dropped some eight feet lightly, and stood on the grass beside her.

‘ Oh, Dick, I am so frightened each time that you risk your dear self up or down. Thank Heaven that you are safe !’

As Lucy breathed the words, Dick turned to meet her, and silently, because he was panting slightly, opened his arms. She nestled like a bird against his breast, asking, still tremulously,

‘ Did you forget that little martin’s hole, the difficult one, half-way? Oh, *Dick* ! you must promise never, never to come down unless I am here first. If you lost your footing and fell, you might break your neck—all alone.’

Lucy shuddered at the picture drawn in her own imagination, and Dick was so deeply concerned at this, she was obliged in turn to reassure him, in lovers’ fashion, which was the prettiest sight in the world.

‘ How could I forget ?’ he asked, half-laughing in his great joy, and holding back

her face to have a better look at it. ‘Why! in my dreams at night I go through our sweet trysts over and over again, always thinking I am late, and running all the way from Forge Farm. Then I climb down, and seem to know every foot-hole by heart.’

‘If we could but find some better place.’

‘There is no better, darling. Why, your uncle built that very wall to defy all trespassers, excepting your lover. Besides, the only other approach is through his own yard or from the house itself. If you ever throw me over, Lucy, and have another lover,’ Dick’s voice changed oddly, ‘I wonder will he risk his neck, too, and come this way?’

‘*Oh, Dick, don’t!*’

Lucy’s low outcry of heart-pained feeling was so sharp that Dick softly closed the discussion upon her lips.

Then under a belated hawthorn, milk-white with bloom, they stood and breathed their lovers' vows and tales; told a hundred important trifles, and jealously enquired each other's thoughts during their late enforced separation of a few days. Dick related his severe disappointment of yesterday evening, and Lucy sweetly begged forgiveness for a fault that was indeed none of hers.

'I meant fully to slip out and meet you as usual, while Madame Dupré would be chatting with Uncle Pierce after supper. But madame met the Pollock girls yesterday afternoon, and accepted an invitation for us both, then and there. If I had pleaded a headache she would have stayed to nurse me, and give me tisane of dried orange peel. She is very fond of me.'

'Who would not be? Tell me that.'

'And she is very fond of you too, dear

old Dick. Sometimes, do you know, I feel half-inclined to confide to her all about ourselves, she is so sympathetic.'

'*I* like her,' this reflectively, with a knitted brow. 'But mother somehow distrusts her sincerity; and if my mother does not exactly know yet how matters stand between us, Lucy, why should madame? By-the-way, where did Captain Ratcliffe first know her?'

'In France, I believe. Only neither of them cares to speak much of that dreadful time—because you know my father was there on business during part of the Reign of Terror; and Uncle Pierce heard he was ill, so went to see him secretly, and found him dying. It is all rather vague to me, but very sad.'

Lucy's voice took a sorrowfully awed tone, as if her imagination was trying to dimly picture two aliens in a foreign land

where murder was in the air; the guillotine stood in the market-place, and fear and want crouched on either side of every hearth.

‘She knew your father, too, you have told me.’

‘Yes, and it makes me glad to hear how handsome and brave she thought him; though she only saw him twice, I believe. —*O, Dick, hark! what’s that?*’

Both of them could hear a sound of trampling feet, as of a party of men running towards them along the track that led from the stables. Hoarse, low calls were interchanged, but seemingly with caution. Dick only waited one moment, then catching Lucy round the waist, he plunged deep into a thicket of snowberries that grew over even his head. There both stood and listened with thumping hearts. They could hear the creak of

light wheels, then the unlocking of the cellar doors, the harsh grating of rusty hinges. Presently followed a rolling sound of barrels urged up a plank, and dropping below with strange, dulled thuds; the hum of orders given, and answers. Dick flung himself on the ground, and wriggling forward to one side of the thicket peered through the long grass and boughs, having found a loophole for one eye.

‘Great heavens!’ he whispered to himself.

Then he crawled back a few yards to where Lucy awaited him in real terror.

‘Don’t be frightened, my sweet, though you will be surprised. The men are not after us; there is no fear. But I believe these fellows are smugglers.’

Lucy clasped his shoulder with both hands.

‘How do you know that?’

‘Because they are strangers and a rough

set. They have got a cart-load of small casks, and are rolling them into the wood cellar there; hiding them at the back, I should say. If your uncle only knew!' Dick looked around thinking. 'I wonder, could I slip back to the house and warn him? We should have them in such a trap.'

'Don't, don't; they would be sure to see you. They would murder you! And then think of me——'

'You are right. It is not safe. We must wait.'

Twenty minutes they two waited there in their hiding-place till the doors were locked again, and the last sound of men's voices died in the distance. The smugglers had stolen silently away—all but one. And him Dick, as he peered cautiously out of their hiding-place, could not see, for the man was standing behind a tree.

This individual was occupied in pencil-

ling down figures in a greasy note-book when the rustling of boughs caught his ear. In a trice he whipped a pistol out of his pocket, and as Dick and Lucy cautiously emerged from their leafy covert they were confronted by a gleaming barrel pointed straight in their faces. Both started, but Dick's quick impulse to throw himself between his sweetheart and danger changed to a start of astonished recognition. Lucy gasped out,

‘Why, Jim, it is you. Oh, how could you frighten me so?’ pressing her outspread little hands above her heart with a look of reproach.

The two men eyed each other silently. Ever since Black Jim's accident of breaking his leg in Ratcliffe's stables, (as the slightly mysterious mishap was explained at the time,) he had never been able to ride again, for his knee-cap was injured

so that he could not grip the saddle properly. His master then kindly pensioned him as a reward for past services, and Jim thereupon became owner of the 'Who'd ha' thought it?' public-house, so called from its singularly lonely position on a road leading to the coast.

Black Jim at first glared at Dick with the revengeful eye of a sentinel who has caught a spy, but soon a slow grin stole over and illumined his swarthy features.

That angered Dick, who said, sternly,
'Well, Jim, I never expected to see you here, and about such work as this.'

'Just so, sir.'

'In Captain Ratcliffe's own grounds, too. You, his old servant, have dared to make use of your acquaintance with the place and to store your booty in his cellars. If the captain only knew this, Jim, you should swing for it.'

No answer. Dick watched the man's face attentively, who stared back at him impassively, without betraying by the least motion of an eyelash a trace of what might be passing in his mind.

‘You, I suppose, are a leader of these misguided fellows. Now, Jim, look ye here, if I don't tell Captain Ratcliffe and some of the other magistrates around, it will be only because you were kind to me when I was a boy.’

‘Well, sir, and if I don't tell Captain Ratcliffe that you two young people were here, with all respect, this morning, it will only be because I always liked you ever since you were a little lad. And also, Miss Jennings, because I have never willingly crossed your wishes ever since you were no higher than that.’ Jim significantly lowered his hand within two feet and a half of the ground. ‘There, sir, you keep silence—so do I. Is that a bargain?’

Dick bit his lip.

Then Lucy spoke out tremulously.

‘Listen, Jim; you are a good fellow at heart, I know. Please understand that we both hope in time my uncle Pierce, who is so good and kind, will give his consent to our marriage.’ She blushed rosy red, and Jim smiled with rough but real sympathy. ‘Only, Jim, for your own sake, please do be careful, for if the captain knew of this he would be so severe. I have heard him say such terrible things, against—you know—*smuggling*.’

Jim stood looking at her, with as inscrutable an expression as that of a sphinx. Never a syllable of contrition, nor in self-defence, came in reply.

‘Think over it, my man,’ were Dick’s parting words. ‘Try to make a fresh start. I will keep my share of the bargain.’

Jim silently nodded and disappeared with bent head among the trees.

When Dick got home, it was after five o'clock. So, being always up early, it was not much before his usual time for seeing his men start work at six. He thought he would like to take a look first this morning to make sure that all was well in the stable, and with the cows and young stock. But what was his astonishment, on entering Bay Ronald's loose-box, to see his favourite lying down with every sign of fatigue as from a hard ride.

'By jingo ! what's this ?' ejaculated Dick, standing stock still in a white heat of fury, for the young one was all of a sweat as if he had been ridden fast and far. In a trice, Dick roused Mike Lee who slept overhead. 'Come here, you young villain,' he cried, dragging Mike down half dressed, to see the sight. 'What tricks have you been up to?'

But Mike stared, still half asleep, with an

air of amazed innocence ; then slapped his thigh.

‘Lor ! the Bay has been pixie-ridden. Sure enough *they’ve* had him.’

But Dick scornfully rejected the idea. Not fairies but men, was his theory—smugglers, of course. How did they bring the horse out so quietly, that he never heard a sound through his window, which was open these warm nights, and overlooked the yard ? The puzzle was solved later, as with bent head he examined the farm lane leading to the road. By the horse-pond the ground was damp in a barely dried wide puddle or two. Here were prints of nailed boots, also round marks the size of hoof-tracks but oddly blurred. Further on he found a round piece of stocking-web.

‘That’s it ! they drew socks over the horse’s feet before leading him out. The

thieves ! well, if they borrow you again, my beauty, I'm a Dutchman.'

What most surprised Dick was that there should be a horseman among them good enough to ride Bay Ronald, who as yet had only allowed himself, Dick, on his back.

' I should have thought no one except old Ratcliffe could have the pluck to try it. He is the best man on a young horse I know,' mused Dick.

CHAPTER IV.

ON the same evening that Dick and his mother exchanged confidences over the gate in the twilight cool, a very different scene was taking place down at Rook-hurst Park. Philip Saxby was pacing up and down the bowling-green with his hands behind his back, pausing every now and then to stare moodily at the moat wall. He did not see the kingfisher sitting there and darting every now and then, like a living flash of blue, down to the water. The hush of the peaceful hour had no charms for him, with its distant sounds from the village, the oc-

casional bark of a dog, children's shrill voices. Some newly-mown grass brought no fragrance to his nostrils; he did not see an evening star pulsing in the opal-grey sky. Lonely; terribly lonely; that was how Philip Saxby felt.

‘Not one soul to speak to; to care for me,’ was the grief gnawing in his mind. ‘If I were to die to-morrow my son would put on crape, bury me decently with every outward show of mourning, and not miss me half-an-hour—not half-an-hour.’

The thought was gall to the lonely father's heart, for Richie was the one being on whom were centred all his hopes, affection, efforts of a lifetime. He had flattered himself that when his son came home they two might become companions, draw closely together, be knit in interests. The reality was that he alone cared for

Rookhurst or its traditions and estate. Soon he bitterly became aware that, even if Richie loafed alongside of him,—stepping delicately as Agag through farm premises or miry hop-gardens,—he, the father, was compelling an unwilling outward obedience. Meanwhile his son and heir was secretly wishing himself back on the Pantiles, or sunning himself at Bristol Hot Wells in the smiles of all his ladies of quality. He was too careful a young man to allow his attentions to be monopolised by anyone in especial.

‘Not a soul!’ There was Miss Murdoch within doors, truly. ‘Bah!’ And again there was Ratcliffe up at The Laurels, who was always a friend. Yet the disappointed man was conscious of a shade of envy that Ratcliffe kept so much younger than himself in mind and body; so friendly, as Philip never had been, with all the

neighbours around—with young folk and old.

For the very reason that Philip liked Ratcliffe, he was conscious of vexation to think that others liked him equally. He would have preferred keeping his friend to himself.

Fearing to weary this Achates with his moroseness, yet unable to bear his own thoughts alone, the unhappy man bent his steps hesitatingly towards The Laurels; only to be told by the discreet maid that the captain had gone out, to visit some friends, she supposed. Back returned Philip feeling freshly aggrieved. No one ever asked him out; but then, he knew the value of false smiles. Rat's fault lay in hailing every acquaintance as warmly as his old and chosen associates.

Back inside Rookhurst once more Philip turned along the path bordering the park

paling. Its shadows suited the gloom of his mind, for it was very dark there, what with the gathering twilight and the branches overhead. All on a sudden the sound of cautious voices on the other side of the paling caught his ear. Richie's, by heaven ! and whispering to some girl.

Philip tip-toed nearer, searching for a crevice, and at last found one through which he could just descry the flutter of a skirt. They were standing a few feet away on this side of the road, and although the talk was carried on in whispers the listener heard, or guessed, enough to make him grind his teeth in anger and knit his brow. The speakers crossed the road going away from him. He could hear no more.

Half-an-hour later, as Miss Murdoch was netting industriously at one side of a square table that supported a tall lamp,

she watched Philip Saxby curiously from under black thick eyebrows. He had searched round the small morning-room, the only sitting-room they now inhabited in the house, and fetched out a long dis-used Bible. Next he was poring over it with pale face and sour expression, muttering occasionally under his breath. Now and again she caught words of texts, from which she guessed he was reading Ecclesiasticus.

“ “Bow down their necks from youth ;” that is it,’ he muttered to himself, unaware that he was speaking.

For this was a habit he had contracted in loneliness, and of which the silent woman opposite was careful not to inform him, seeing that thereby she gleaned much of the drift of his thoughts.

“ “And what is heavier than lead? and what is the name thereof but a fool?” ’

His fingers marked the spot while with the other hand he fluttered back some pages, scanning them as if searching for something applicable to his own lot.

‘ Fool again ; what’s here ? “ The fool saith I have no friends, I have no thanks for all my good deeds, and they that eat my bread speak evil of me . . . How oft and of how many shall he be laughed to scorn ! For he knoweth not aright what it is to have, and it is all one unto him as if he had it not.” ’

This lesson of wisdom he relished less, leaning his elbow on the table and his head upon his hand. Presently he turned back to the first denunciation, reading it twice aloud emphatically to himself. The second time he did so the door opened, and in dawdled young Richie, who stood yawning.

‘ Upon my life, this is not a merry party.

Have you been sitting alone, sir?' (Richie was uncomplimentary enough to overlook Miss Murdoch's existence.) 'You should have gone to Captain Rat——'

He broke off as his father raised a face that startled him by its aged look and expression of angered reproach.

'I can bear my own company, I am thankful to say, seeing that I do not get much good of that of my own flesh and blood. Where were *you*, sir, may I ask?'

'I?' stuttered Richie. 'I went to The Laurels for a while——'

'No lies, sir!' thundered the father. 'The captain was absent, Miss Lucy was out too, I went there myself.'

'Oh, if you follow me about and spy upon my actions——'

Richie looked alarmed, yet attempted bluster.

‘ Hold your tongue, you fool. Who was the girl you were flirting with beside the park paling? I spy upon no one; but ill deeds will out, and if you stand upon the high-road you may expect to be seen.’

‘ *The girl. What girl?* I think it very hard, sir . . . Young men will be young men, as you know. You were so once yourself.’

‘ I was. But the only woman I ever fixed my affections upon was a lady; the only woman I ever loved. I should have thought shame to try to entrap some foolish village girl below my station by promises I never meant to keep. Miss Murdoch, may I request you to allow us to continue this painful discussion in private?’

For raising his eyes he perceived those of the housekeeper bent upon him with an intent and searching expression.

Giving a mute nod, Miss Murdoch took up her netting basket and hastened with limping gait out of the room. As the door closed behind her Philip turned once more to his son, who stood with hanging head like a culprit before the magistrate.

‘You were near Amos Bird’s cottage. Were you with his grand-daughter? Yes, or no?’

‘I was, if you will have it,’ came in sullen answer.

‘So you cannot even leave an orphan alone—the grandchild of my oldest servant about the place. Have you no sense of rectitude and honour?’

‘You are very stern, sir. At least, you have grown so in the last few years,’ pleaded Richie, truthfully enough. ‘On my conscience, I have done the girl no harm. After all, what does it matter?’

‘It matters this: that I have set my

heart upon your marrying early a young, beautiful girl who has grown up under my own eye. Lucy Jennings, in fact. She is an heiress besides ; so don't let me hear of your turning up your nose at her for a country belle, as you did the other evening at the Pollocks. Her uncle and I have talked it over already.'

Then, as Richie stood silent, shuffling his feet and looking down at the Turkey rug, his father went on, with a burst of ungovernable fury, 'What the devil! Why don't you answer? Confound it, do you think that I struggled and waited to become master here at last, after years of anxiety, for *you* to go against my will—you, my only son? Have you no sense of the heritage of the Saxby name, of this place, from which we were dispossessed for so many generations, that you spend your time making love to a gipsy jade,

forsooth, and have not a word to say for yourself when I offer you the best match in the county ?

‘ I—I— One likes to choose for oneself, you know, sir.’

‘ And pray whom would you choose ? Remember there are only two in our family, and should you be cut off before me, though Heaven grant I may never see that day, yet remember that in that case I must—should—think it my duty to leave Rook-hurst back to your cousin. He is a Saxby, at least through his mother.’

Richie grew rather red, the idea was so uncomfortable ! ridiculous too.

‘ I am strong enough,’ he muttered, attempting a laugh. ‘ I have got over measles and whooping-cough, and cut all my teeth, I believe.’

‘ You have not cut your wisdom teeth ; or if you have it is to little purpose. To

come back to the point. Do you, or do you not, care to pay your addresses to Miss Jennings, or will you leave her to be carried off by your cousin at Forge Farm?’

‘What, Dick? Why, I have never noticed—she has been so little at home since she left school.’

‘Long enough,’ retorted Philip drily. ‘You are not in love, that is pretty plain, or you would have seen he is your rival. Why, he follows her with his eyes everywhere. I don’t dislike seeing a young fellow so thoroughly in love, it shows he sets his whole mind to get what he wants.’

Then as if to himself, ‘That is what I did.’

Richie began moving uneasily, fiddling with the china vases on the mantelpiece, kicking the logs of wood with his foot.

‘You seem—upon my word, I must say it—rather partial to my cousin Dick, sir.

He is lucky indeed if he has got you on his side as well as the pretty Lucy.' Then after a pause the youth burst out with mortified bitterness, 'Deuce take it! I never dreamed he was after her. You see, sir, I am still rather young to think of settling down, and had meant to have my fling for awhile. But of course this news and your wishes alter the matter. Lucy is the only girl in the country worth looking at, and,' loftily, 'I always meant to show her my real sentiments some day.'

The truth was that Richie was secretly deadly envious of his cousin Dick. They two being of the same age, and bearing the same name, had always been compared in their own hearing ever since childhood. Richie was aware that, even with Rookhurst at his own back, the comparison was generally in his cousin's favour. He made the best of his inferiority, smiled and

seemed good friends with Dick; but if ever an occasion *should* show itself in which he might prove himself the better man, then—and a gleam like cruelty lit Richie's pale blue eyes as he smiled to himself—what joy to oust his bumpkin rival, his dear cousin, '*handsome Dick!*'

The old man, for so Philip might now be called from his appearance, had risen too, and stood watching his son with an earnest, hardly-satisfied scrutiny. Richie was so ductile in his hands, as Ratcliffe had once said, that Philip at times could hardly understand him. Was this filial obedience; was it hypocrisy; or—cowardice? His withered, pale face, crossed by its red scar, looked keenly and sternly at the smooth features of his son, whose downcast eyes kept either staring at the carpet or examining his polished nails. Oh, if the fellow would but look him in

the face like a man, would even fly into a passion against his own father! Philip sighed.

‘Perhaps I was too harsh with you just now, my boy. You say you are willing to please me, and I hope yourself, in this matter. You may believe your old father, who has only you to care for, that it will be for your future good. Shake hands.’ Then forcing a cheery laugh (alas! how often he had forced laughter in these very rooms when another man was master of Rookhurst). ‘There, we will say no more about it. You will pay your court to pretty Lucy, and give over all village amours.’

‘One can carry on both, sometimes,’ sniggered Richie, with a weak attempt at assertion that he was a man of the world after all, and not a whipped school-boy. His likewise forced mirth died out under his father’s stern glance.

‘I should not advise you to try it. Pierce Ratcliffe is not a man to be trifled with. And even I, though your father, respect Lucy Jennings so much that I should make it my business to see that you respected her too.’

‘I was only joking, sir,’ sullenly.

‘I see ; some of your university jokes. Well, well, good-night.’

As his father left the room, Richie flung himself into a deep chair, where he hung his head and crossed his legs in an attitude of ill-temper. Biting his thumb-nail, a trick he had never lost since boyhood, he cursed the situation in a small voice, but with blasphemy so foul-mouthed that few, even of his wildest university companions, would have matched it. Not that he disliked Lucy Jennings ; on the contrary, he ogled and simpered with the rest of her train of admirers. But to be kept in leading-strings, ordered to marry

and live respectably henceforth, with a pistol held at his ear, so to speak, was too infernally galling.

‘And so Dick is in my way, is he? All right, I will take the girl if only just to spite him. I wonder if the little minx cares for the farmer fellow? No matter! Captain Rat knows what’s what, and he’ll make her marry the highest bidder. Lord! if she has been sweet on Dick, won’t I take it out of them both when once I get the ring on her finger.’

Whereupon, still grumbling to himself, this amiable prospective bridegroom yawned, went up the stairs and rung for his valet, who played cards and drank brandy and water obsequiously with him till the small hours of the morning. It was good French brandy, thanks to the valet’s cunning discrimination, although obtained from the ‘Who’d ha’ thought it’ tavern.

The master of Rookhurst household kept the cellar keys rigidly in his own control, and Richie was supposed to have only a delicate taste in claret.

As will have been perceived by this scene, Richie's character had altered considerably for the worse during his university career and subsequent travels. In childhood he seemed fairly good-natured, though weak; now vanity was eating into his secret soul like a disease, so that whenever outshone by any other man, as frequently happened, Richie hated that individual deep in his heart. Nevertheless, he owned enough self-control to smile outwardly, promising himself the while to be revenged some day. He seldom quarrelled, he was too great a coward for that, but for all his mincing effeminate ways he never forgave. Unstable as water in all else, Richie was a tenacious cur, as one of his friends

once said of him, if he thought any other dog had a better bone than himself; he might not fight for it, but he would try to steal it.

Philip Saxby had shown himself unscrupulous in his dealings with Hasledene, dissimulating, underhanded; but then he had gone straight for his purpose without unnecessary cruelty. Not once had he flinched from his resolve of regaining, what he considered, the rightful estate of his forefathers.

Disappointed love, jealousy, and cherished tradition instilled into his mind since boyhood! These were the chief motives of his evil deeds. He had hated fiercely, with a great slow revenge that could bide its time patiently, disdaining, meanwhile, to stoop to act of meanness or petty malice.

CHAPTER V.

CHRISTMAS-TIME and a white world. As hard a winter had not been, those said, who remembered, since the one when the Hasledene Saxbys took their last leave of Rookhurst.

It was just such another night as that one some thirteen years ago, when Philip Saxby crossed the park, glistening white under the star-strewn sky, to tap at Catherine's window with his terrible message. One that had meant to her disgrace, a wrenching of her woman's heart-strings from around old associations of home and pride of place ; that had brought to himself

years of—what? Success? Yes, success : but a life of ever-growing loneliness in the moated house within the wooded valley, emptiness of heart, a sense of being distrusted, unpopular, even shunned by those around him.

Away with such thoughts! Rookhurst House is gleaming to-night like a fairy palace. Lights streaming from the front windows gleam on the snow before the door, where such a crowd of coaches, chariots, and chaises has gathered, as the old mansion has not seen since nearly twenty years. For to-night there is a ball in the large wainscotted hall of Rookhurst, Richie having persuaded his father to this outburst of gaiety by effusive promises to take all the trouble upon his own shoulders. Had he not conducted some of the best assemblies at Cheltenham? been the intimate friend of the master of the

ceremonies at Bath? Where was the use of having the finest house in the country, if it remained always shut up? Besides, the neighbours thought it niggardly that not one of them, for years past, had been asked to even a hunt breakfast.

So Philip agreed. He certainly always vaguely intended to keep open house, and show hospitality once his son came of age, but Richie had spent much time from home at fashionable watering-places. Then, when he did return, the father, with secret bitterness, wished to try whether the son would take any pleasure in his parent's society. Philip was as jealous as a woman; he clung despairingly to the belief that Richie after all really loved him; human nature still kept itself alive thus in one last spot of his otherwise hardened heart.

But to-night no such feelings embittered

his mind, as the Squire of Rookhurst stood receiving his guests with an air of pride and cheerfulness that his face had not worn for many a long day. At last luck had turned ; all was going well with him ! Richie was a good son and amenable ; and if the lad wished to show hospitality to his friends, for he was a good deal sought after in the neighbourhood, why not ? Besides, what was more likely to dazzle Lucy Jennings's eyes than to see the full splendour of her future home ? Richie's courtship of the coy little witch since last June had been slow, it must be owned, yet both father and son believed it was progressing satisfactorily ; to-night's ball indeed was intended as a climax to the business. So all the chandeliers blazed in the big rooms that were at last thrown open, displaying their faded yellow silk furniture, which some of the guests remembered as new at Catherine

Saxby's marriage. Merry strains resounded from the musicians' gallery ; while in the supper-room the tables groaned with old family silver displayed in profusion.

Richie had engaged Lucy Jennings some weeks before for the third set. The previous dances duty obliged him to sacrifice, so he deprecatingly explained, to the two ladies of highest quality in the neighbourhood.

From the moment she entered the ball-room, Lucy was surrounded by such a crowd of admirers eager to secure her hand for the following sets that there was quite a crush in that direction. Indeed, only the ostrich feather tips in her hair could be seen by the more distant spectators. The elderly ladies of county family looked on in some displeased surprise, making comments to each other. Since the days of Catherine Saxby they remembered no belle

so universally admired, or who attracted so many desirable suitors. Catherine was a greater heiress, it is true, possessing an ancient name and estate, yet even she never set more hearts beating than did this humbler wild rose, this girl of obscure parentage: merely the pretty niece of a retired naval lieutenant, himself quite unknown to the neighbourhood when he made his appearance some dozen years ago.

So the dowagers frowned, the long ostrich plumes in their black velvet hats with diamond loops, nodding in sympathy as they whispered together. Yet, strange to say, Lucy had hardly a real enemy among all the girls present. The sparkle of fun in her dark eyes was so like that of a happy child, her vivacious good-humour so utterly, guilelessly joyful. They might call her a minx, a coquette, saucy; and at times with reason. Yet when pretty Lucy Jen-

nings looked another girl in the face, or nestled her hand caressingly in the other's arm,—for she met her own sex as lovingly and trustfully as a child will all other, even strange children,—to the honour of their young hearts be it said, few could resist her charm. They acknowledged to each other that she was a ‘dear soul.’ Not very clever, said some ultra accomplished ones; not witty, said others whose tongues were touched with salt; not high bred, though with pretty and unassuming manners, loftily remarked other haughty maidens.

‘But when all's said,’ declared Lady Althea de Voeux, daughter herself of the greatest Kent magnate, a fearless horse-woman, plain featured but with a fine figure, ‘though we have all got our good points, still there is just pretty Lucy Jennings in the county, and then the rest of us!’

I vow, child ; I wish you would be quick in making up your mind,' she frankly declared, coolly taking Miss Jennings under the chin, though this was but their second time of meeting. ' Do you know we are all waiting for your leavings? (Thank goodness, none of the men are by to hear me!) Everyone says that not a girl can get married in the county till you have made your choice.'

At which Lucy, laughing and blushing, shook her head with its piled-up curls giving back so innocent and clear a look no woman's instinct could doubt its genuineness.

' Your ladyship is far too flattering. But, indeed, I would not for worlds interfere with the wishes of any friend or neighbour if I could help it.'

' Ah, but that is just what you can't,' laughed Lady Althea, good-humouredly, and walked on.

Lucy only spoke the truth, that it would grieve her to stand knowingly in the light of even a rival. She was indeed of such a sweet disposition that at times she embroiled herself simply through the attempt to please all the persons around her. And this is a manifestly impossible task, seeing men and maids are not like the angels in heaven.

To-night Lucy looked more charming than even her most enamoured swains could have believed, in gauzy Greek draperies, spangled with silver, displaying her soft exquisiteness of form and the marvellous milky whiteness of her shoulders and arms. No goddess she ! but rather one of the sweetest nymphs ever created. One could fancy her bright eyes peering through oak boughs, and her merry vanishing laugh as she was still pursued, but never caught. Yet, in the midst of her

triumphs this famous night, a close observer might have noticed a tiny droop at the corners of her rosy lips, the least occasional quiver in her dimpled chin, while from time to time she shot a seemingly careless glance towards the door. The eyes' envoy came back, alas, empty of whatever sight it sought, then dropped like a spent arrow towards the ground.

Between the second and third dance the belle of the ball found Anne Butler, and drew her aside, for they two were great friends.

‘Dear Anne, I have so wanted to speak to you already to-night. I How vastly becoming those pearls are twisted in your hair.’

Anne, serene and fair, with a large calm of manner, looked at her friend out of grey Minerva eyes.

‘I am glad you like my appearance.

Do you know that everyone in the room is praising and talking of yourself? If you had any vanity your head would be turned, Lucy; only I believe you have been so used to admiration from a child that you don't think much of it.'

'Indeed I do; it is very pleasant. That is, people are all most kind and I always feel grateful and glad when I seem to please them. By the way, Anne, do you know—is—' (Lucy opened her fan nervously) 'is Dick Saxby not coming?'

'I should think *not*, indeed,' (haughtily). 'It is well to forgive, but still there remains too much due to his father's memory. Mr. Philip Saxby played too false a part to poor Squire Hasledene for Dick willingly to cross this threshold.'

Not noticing in her exalted mood that the exquisite pink colouring of Lucy's cheeks took a slightly deeper tint, Anne

went on, looking with level glance before her,

‘ Dick was hard pressed, even urged by many friends to come to-night. So he told me. But I do not expect him. He consulted me about it a fortnight ago, and we agreed that although he is good friends with Richie still his appearance to-night would be going too far. His mother left him perfectly free ; though one guesses her feeling on the subject, and my father even wished him to come. What did he say to you ?’

‘ He—well, dear Anne, I thought he *ought* to come. Richie begged me to ask him. After all, it is not Richie’s fault that their fathers fought a duel, and one should forgive even one’s enemies, you know.’

‘ Your forgivableness of disposition passes my understanding,’ declared Anne, with an indulgent smile. ‘ Really, Lucy,

I begin to believe you have never yet been able to think ill of anyone. No doubt you make excuses even for Philip Saxby, yet my father who is so good a man is silent on that score. However, what did Dick say?’

‘Nothing decided, only that he might perhaps I may have been mistaken I am not quite certain.’

Naughty Lucy! She was vividly remembering how she had clasped her hands on Dick’s shoulder, her eyes pleading in his with such beguiling sweetness that Dick, hard pressed, had replied with impassioned kisses, and an abrupt promise that for her sake, hers alone, he would try his best. Yes! he would see about it; he would look in if he could. Whereupon the lover fled from this temptress or good angel, whichever she might be in so difficult a matter of conscience.

Till this instant, Lucy firmly believed that her sweetheart would keep his word. Yet the first and following sets were gone by, and she was beginning the second of her two dances with Richie. It was growing late, and the young beauty was secretly troubled. Would Dick disappoint her after all? The ball had no animation; no life in its fiddles, no brightness in the lights. In Lucy's secret heart all festivities now-a-days were only merry circlings round one central figure, the chief pillar of the room: a tall one with golden hair and bright blue eyes.

Putting aside her own disappointment, the dear girl was grieved in her heart that Dick should hang back from accepting the olive branch of reconciliation. For Richie, smiling hypocrite, lately sought her innocent intervention when Dick steadily evaded any distinct acceptance

of the invitation to Rookhurst. His triumph would secretly lose its savour unless Dick were by to gnash his teeth seeing the full glory of Rookhurst which he had never entered since childhood ; to watch himself, Richie, moving about on the best of terms with the chief of the county gentry ; the principal, and he flattered himself one of the neatest figures there. Ah, ‘ handsome Dick ’ should feel that he was nobody in comparison ! Confound it all ! why did the fellow stay away ? Bending nearer, the host ogled in his partner’s pretty face, with the smile he flattered himself had pretty often proved irresistible at fashionable gatherings.

‘ What a pity that my cousin Dick has not come ; yet I thought he promised *you* to look in. I could never have believed any gentleman would refuse Miss Jennings her lightest wish. What ! be en-

treated by those fair lips, those dazzling eyes, and yet hold out! The man must be a block, insensible, lost to all feeling of the beautiful. Ah! were I but happy enough to be put to such a test. Dear Lucy, do not look away—pray listen to me.'

'What is that disturbance under the gallery? Indeed, Mr. Richard, we are observed.'

And freeing her hand, which Richie had seized with ardour under pretence of the dance, Lucy looked round to the upper end of the hall.

There a group of Christmas mummers had apparently gained unexpected admittance to the ball-room, and were already surrounded by a laughing, inquisitive crowd. They were masked, wearing fantastic costumes, and whether they were really invited guests or had merely sought

this means of gaining access to the ball-room the new-comers were equally hailed with clamorous merriment.

Then the traditional fun began. St. George, distinguished by a pasteboard helmet and tall plumes, had a smart fencing bout with the King of Egypt, his rapier play eliciting shouts of applause. Other mummers joined in the fray, especially the doctor who cured everyone. The dumb show was ended at last by the devil himself, a sooty apparition with horns, who from his peculiar length of person was greeted with shouts of 'Pollock, Sammy Pollock,' and who furiously whacked all the combatants into peace if not Hades with his broom.

Meanwhile the musicians, entering into spirit of the affair, struck up a lively accompaniment which finally changed into a rattling waltz. This was an extra to the

card. St. George, who had given a secret signal to the fiddlers' gallery now sprang towards Lucy Jennings, and with a low bow seized her round the waist. Next minute she was whirling in his arms half-way down the hall before Richie could interfere. The saint did not pause till after two turns of the ball-room, when, stopping at last in a quiet corner, he whispered through the cut in his mask that did duty for a mouth,

‘Do you know me?’

‘*Dear Dick!*’

‘You see, I have kept my promise.’

At that moment Richie came fuming and strutting after his flown partner, having angrily ordered the musicians to take up their proper programme again. St. George bowed; the mummers' merry masquerade was over. A minute later they all trooped out of the hall, cutting capers

as they went, and followed as far as the village by a train of on-lookers who had gathered at the ball-room windows to see the gentry dancing.

‘A set of rustic boobies,’ stuttered Richie, ‘Who can that fellow St. George be? Upon my life, it is an insult; a little more, and I had half a mind to knock him down.’

‘Oh, don’t say that,’ pleaded Lucy, with such a laughing face as if the whole past summer sunshine had gathered there. ‘Why, if he were only one of your grooms it would merely be a joke, and should be taken in good part at Christmas-time. Besides,’ she whispered, mysteriously, ‘I fancy the two youngest Butler boys wished to come to-night, but they are hardly old enough, Anne thought, for new blue coats. So please, please, do not take it amiss.’

‘To please *you*, sweetest creature,’ said Richard, bowing gallantly over her hand, ‘is indeed unspeakable happiness.’

Philip Saxby, standing beside his friend Ratcliffe, was looking on from a distance.

‘They don’t make a bad pair, eh, Rat?’ he whispered, joyfully, rubbing his hands with ill-concealed triumph.

‘Well matched, well matched.’ Pierce Ratcliffe nodded his head and smiled benignantly, while his sharp eyes watched the retreating figure of St. George.

At that minute Philip was tasting what seemed at last a cup of unalloyed delight. For once in his life he was glad! The mirth, the sounds of dancing feet around, the strains of music to which he had so long been unaccustomed, sent his lately torpid blood coursing as with revived youth freely through his veins. He felt almost young again, nay, he *was* young!

This sense of triumph was real life after years of stagnation, he was uplifted in heart and felt satisfied. Think of it! How much that meant to the lately lonely man.

‘This is grand, Rat! We will have many such a night, old fellow. Many a merry meeting together, eh, old friend? You’ll always stand by me . . . that’s right.’

It was not yet supper-time, but Mr. Saxby had taken several dowagers for refreshments to the saloon, and each time, anxious to rouse himself and play the genial host, he had drunk somewhat heavily.

‘Why, I have been shutting myself up far too long! You always said so . . . You were right—right.’

At that instant Madame Dupré smilingly approached.

‘ Who will take a hand at cards, eh, you two gentlemen? Which one?’ she asked, in her pretty broken English, making eyes over her fan at both men. Then, lively little woman though she was, a shiver passed through her and she became suddenly grave. ‘ Will you come, mon ami?’ and taking Ratcliffe’s arm with a secret pressure of insistance she led him away—then whispered in French, ‘ How strange Mr. Saxby looks. Ah, mon Dieu! he gave me quite a turn in my blood. It carries bad luck to look so drunk with joy. Heavens! do you recall some we have seen in Paris when——’

‘ Hush, hush, my bonne amie,’ returned Captain Rat.

Philip, indeed, could not contain his joy. He felt he must go outside and cool his brain in the frosty air; give vent to his exultation unseen. It was not supper-time

yet, and no one would notice his exit, so he slipped noiselessly out by a side-door. Ah, the night air was delicious, so ice-cold, fanning his brows, heated with wine. Midnight struck from the great stable clock, as the master of the revels strolled over the side bridge and went round to the back of the moat where all was quiet. He could still see the lights, distinguish strains of music from the front of the house, but here all was utterly deserted and dark, except for a faint reflection from the snow and some starlight overhead.

Philip went down the slope of grass, and stood beside the moat which was frozen over hard since a day or two. Yes, at this very spot his ancestor, James Saxby, had once so stood attempting vainly to storm an entrance to Rookhurst, which this his descendant had afterwards regained. Here the old Ironside had been

drowned, lying in his armour under the water for many long years. It was in yonder room that his skull had been placed on the table, and hailed with full glasses by that tipsy crew of whom so few remained living this night. Ha ! Philip had kept his vow well. He had sworn to be revenged ; sworn to regain Rookhurst by fair means or foul ; and by the latter, so an inner voice told him, success came at last. Down, down, remorse ! vain prickings of conscience long since supposed lulled to sleep. It was done ! and, no matter how, it was rightly done. Had not his old ancestor, who stood here, known best the truth of that family quarrel ? Truly he must, having lived nearer the time of the disputed possession. Why should that still small voice plague Philip with whispered innuendoes that Rookhurst was a fair place and Catherine Saxby formerly a beautiful woman ?

The conscious sinner bent his head, standing with folded arms on the brink of the moat.

Close by on the bridge he never noticed a watching figure bent too, but with age, stooping from rheumatic joints. Philip Saxby raised his head, set his jaw firmly with his old trick of feature. Nay, nay, he would not repent, he was glad, glad, glad! He would step down there on the ice above the very spot where the dead man fell.

‘It will warm my heart to fancy that the old fellow knows, and is glad too.’

So he stepped down, and out midway on the frozen moat.

The figure on the bridge raised its head and peered over. The watcher’s mouth opened as if to call out, but on second thoughts was silent.

Then came a sudden, long, shivering

crack ; a louder one ;—a hoarse scream and plunge. The gurgling cry rang through the darkness at the back of the house despairingly. It startled the owls in the fir-trees behind, and a row of sleeping ducks on the moat edge took their heads from under their wings and quacked noisily. Round the corners of Rookhurst it passed with a wail, growing fainter till it was lost in a burst of merry music from the fiddles and the pounding of the dancers' feet within.

Along the bridge hurried the watching figure with hobbling gait. Old Amos Bird, for it was he, peered with shaking head and trembling, withered hands into the shadows thrown by the arch. He could see a jagged, dark crack in the ice whence the water was gurgling out. There was a man's hand with clutching fingers grasping, grasping at the sharp ice edge that

broke away from the convulsive grip ; then
—the hand disappeared.

‘ The water has sucked him under ; that
is where it flows out by the drain, and he
is under the coping. They’ll never get
him now,’ said the old man, hoarsely,
drawing back in horror.

CHAPTER VI.

AMOS stopped short above the snow-covered slope. No sound now; nought to be seen but his master's foot-tracks in the white surface. He stood irresolute, hesitating, with the slowness of old age, whether he had best hasten to the house and give warning, or go nearer to the moat edge, and look—and look. Somewhat doting these last two years, his ideas came slowly, and to-night seemed half-frozen in his brain like the blood that stirred sluggishly in his frigid veins.

The side door opened, and sharp voices of some wrangling men-servants startled

him. With sudden fear, the old peasant turned and hurried along the clean-swept path from the back door and bridge to the stables.

‘They shan’t see me, they shan’t see my foot-tracks; no, no, they shan’t,’ he thought, with vague terror.

Doubled up with rheumatism, Amos could run but slowly, with contortions of body and aching joints. It was a halting flight, but to him a matter of life and death.

‘If I told them, they’d say, why didn’t I warn master? I knowed ’twouldn’t bear! I knowed he’d go in!’ Amos kept repeating to himself, as his hobnailed boots clattered slowly along the brick-paved path.

No lights in the stables; no grooms about. Ah, no one saw him, nobody would know. Yet it seemed while he hurried

past as if all the bare trees whispered his secret. The shrubby bushes, the black windows of the coach-house and the stables, everything, all the world, knew that he was a murderer.

‘I could ha’ told him; I could.’ Cold sweat now was trickling down the old man’s withered face. He felt like Cain fleeing from human intercourse—an outcast.

Once beyond the stables, the fugitive’s pace slackened as he drew long labouring breaths. Where was he to go? He must hide; for at home his grand-daughter with her sharp young eyes would look him through and through, and ask him what he was afraid of. Muttering to himself, Amos was mechanically moving meanwhile towards the bullocks’ shed. As his dim eyes saw its tiled roof outlined against the sky, it suddenly struck him that here was his natural harbour of refuge. The oxen’s

shed was to him a second home. Boy and man he was used to be daily within its pens or yards, suffering no one else to enter these precincts where he felt supreme. Yes, yes; he would hide here where the big dumb beasts would ask no questions. The very walls knew him and would shelter him.

Unbolting the door in the darkness Amos crept in and shut it to, knotting the hasp with a piece of rope to a big nail, a trick he had invented before to prevent intruders from the outside. Then he paused in the darkness and felt safe.

The oxen were lying down, all but the youngest which rose at his entrance and sniffed deeply. The old man quieted Joey with his voice and crept nearer. Ah, the beasts were rare friends! He felt their warm breath about him, warming the frosty air; could dimly descry their huge

black forms lying on the straw, and a sense of companionship and sympathy stole over him, restoring his scattered wits. Making a nest for himself in some loose hay beyond Billy's pen, old Amos curled round like a dog and dropped down heavily.

'He's gone! The old one is drowned,' he began thinking to himself, quaking afresh. 'I'd be glad if only the young one was put out of the way too, I would. They'll call me a witch, and say I had a hand in the matter, if they come to know I stood by on the bridge and saw him. They'd kill me; they would! They'd drown me too; they would! If they were to go up now, and search my house and find that pot full of crooked pins up the chimney A—h!' He shivered, then reassured himself. 'No, no; Patty is too clever a girl. She'll put those blood-hounds off the track. A good wench;

sharp as a needle . . . And Mr. Dick will stand my friend. He never told about Ebenezer; not he! P'raps he'd be master here again, if only the young one was drowned too. Serve them both right.'

Thus the old man kept on muttering to himself, with sorely troubled brain.

He had gone down to the mansion like other folk to look on from outside at what of the unusual revelry could be seen. Just as the ox herd was going home to bed, he noticed Mr. Saxby come out alone; watched him by the starlight with dull hatred in his own aged breast, guessing the master's exultant feelings; and yet by some human instinct the peasant was equally aware that the rich man had felt solitary for years. For all Philip Saxby's triumph he was standing *alone* there to-night outside in the snow.

Why had he not warned Mr. Saxby when

the squire adventured himself on the ice? Amos did not rightly know. A sudden savage joy filled his soul at sound of the crack; the scream; at sight of the disappearing figure. His thoughts had they taken shape in words might have been, 'Ah, that will teach him; that will. A fine sousing! Serve him right!' But Amos had not thought; there was no time. He only stared, with the slow curiosity of eighty bucolic years, to see what would happen next. Perhaps had he seen Philip Saxby struggling, some emotion of pity might have stirred within him, but as it was the shock was too sudden: the ice opened; the dark water received its victim—and all was over.

So the old ox driver lay quaking in the stall; the only living being who knew that Philip Saxby had just been gasping, drowning under the ice, while fiddles were

twanging in the hall, and his son and guests were footing it merrily in a country dance.

Meanwhile, inside Rookhurst, the host was not missed until supper-time. Then the principal dowager in the ball-room stood waiting in some displeasure, surrounded by other impatient supper-going couples, for Mr. Saxby was not to be found. Richie bustled here and there, cursing genteelly under his breath at his father for an old fool.

A vain hue and cry was raised through the drawing-rooms, and joined in as a good joke. As in the story of 'The Mistletoe Bough,' so the guests pretended to search, jesting with Richie on his father's late hermit existence, and how the anchorite must have fled to escape the sounds and sights of dissipation. So ten minutes

passed ; then Richie, seeing clouds on some of the more hungry elderly ladies' faces, hurried to offer himself as a substitute for his defaulting parent. His father was unwell ; reluctantly obliged to go to bed. With simpering smiles he assured the duchess that the honour thus devolving upon himself prevented him from regretting his father's enforced absence. Then, displaying really praiseworthy tact, Richie reorganized the supper procession, led them all into the dining-room, where the guests supped heartily ; joked loudly at the *contretemps* ; and—in whispers to the servants ordered their carriages.

The dowagers amongst themselves passed round the word huffily that a slight was put upon them by Mr. Saxby, and that, in spite of Richie's profusion of amiability, it behoved their dignity to retire like their strange entertainer.

Richie caught what was passing in their minds, and hastily signed to Miss Murdoch, who had presided over the tea-tables all the evening; then hissed in her ear,

‘Go upstairs and pull my father out of bed. Make him come down! Tell him the duchess will never come again; she is very angry.’

‘Are you sure he is in bed?’ whispered Miss Murdoch, with a strangely troubled face. ‘I have listened outside the door, and he is not snoring. He always snores early. Every night I hear him all down the long passage.’

‘Go and see. Why the devil can’t you make him come? The whole affair is being spoilt to-night.’

A few seconds later Miss Murdoch’s thin, gaunt figure was bending down putting her ear to the keyhole of Mr. Saxby’s bed-room. She listened intently for some

seconds. Not a sound. She next tapped with cold, long fingers; tapped again; now louder. Still no answer! Then, though fearful of Mr. Saxby's stern displeasure, she softly turned the handle and peered into the room. All was dark. She called his name low—louder; spoke, excusing her intrusion; last hurriedly, with sudden resolution, groped her way forward in the darkness; touched the bed. It was quite empty.

Filled with sudden terrors, the house-keeper limped hastily downstairs, almost slipping on the polished oak steps in her haste, and began searching through the corridors, passing like a black ghost by happy couples sitting in nooks and curtained recesses. Fresh fears filled her that the county gentry would soon be really gone; then Richie would turn upon her, and for all his smooth voice and

purring ways the lonely spinster was afraid of him. She had reared him from a child, worshipped him slavishly, yet in her heart she believed he disliked her; might even persuade his father to turn her out of doors after all her years of service. Then she hurried into the servants' quarters, with sharp accents questioning each maid and man when they had seen their master last. A little pantry boy, whom she caught by the ear just as he was devouring a stolen mince-pie, blurted out, choked and frightened, he remembered noticing Mr. Saxby go outside by the side door. A quarter?—half-an-hour ago? He could not say.

Out into the darkness and cold Miss Murdoch hurried; stole across the bridge with hesitating steps, not to vex Philip, who was irascible if interrupted in his lonely moods. She looked over the parapet;

the row of ducks which had been so lately disturbed set up a fresh quacking. The sound drew her eyes downwards, and through the winter gloom, to which her sight was growing accustomed, she could just discern footsteps in the snow leading to the moat.

Ah ! heavens ! the ice was broken !

A woman's scream rang out wildly ; then another and another. She hurried down to the moat edge and dropping upon her knees began beating her breast with her hands ; wringing them ; raising them up to the night sky ; as still she screamed and screamed again till those shrieks penetrated into the passages of the house and a crowd of frightened servants carrying lights hurried out. There they found a half-maddened creature pointing wildly at the water, where a small dark object was floating.

‘It can’t be master. Why should it be? What would bring him here?’ cried excited voices in a questioning chorus.

‘It’s his hat; his old hat; I know it even in the darkness.’

And thereupon the housekeeper, still upon her knees, rocked herself to and fro in utter distraction of grief, burying her head in the snow and frozen grass.

The terrible news spread through the house in a few seconds, as the affrighted servants rushed in with terror-stricken faces. Most of the men-kind among the guests, foremost of all, Ratcliffe, hurried after Richie to the scene of the accident. The moat edge was crowded with eager figures; lighted by lanterns, torches, even lamps snatched up in haste. Ratcliffe at once assumed command. Tearing off his coat he gave all necessary directions with the coolness of one used to order others in

moments of peril ; improvising grappling hooks fastened to poles. Then lying down in the snow above the moat coping, his arms plunged into the icy water, he was the first after several fruitless efforts to find and help to drag his dead friend's body to the bank.

Meanwhile, the carriages which had already been ordered were crowding at the front of the house, while the ladies who all cloaked and hooded in haste filled the inner hall. They stood horrified, yet impatient ; anxious to hear the result of what efforts were being made to resuscitate the apparently lifeless corpse. There was no long suspense. Dr. Twigge, having tried all remedies known at the beginning of the century, soon pronounced life to be extinct.

Twenty minutes later the trampling of impatient horses and rolling of carriages

passed away from the door. The last of the men-guests then wound their comforters up to their noses, gulped down hot brandy and water, pressed upon them as a matter of protection by the sporting doctor, and departed in groups, muttering to each other testily, once out of earshot of the house,

‘What in the name of goodness made Philip Saxby do it?’

An accident? An accident forsooth! How could it have been an accident? What should take him outside and on the ice when he ought to have been attending to his guests? Such was the universal feeling expressed by the various occupants of all the carriages now scattered over the country in different directions. The first horror, natural commiseration for the son’s supposed grief, and awe at a life being cut off in such untimely almost un-

seemly fashion, now gave way to a vague sentiment of universal condemnation.

Lady Althea cleverly summed up the public opinion when she declared to her five other companions in her father's great yellow family coach,

‘ Well, accident or no, I call it very bad taste on the part of Mr. Saxby. There he has been at Rookhurst for the last twelve years, hoarding up his money like a miser ; the house closed to the neighbourhood, not a friend even asked to shoot birds in September. And then to-night, when we thought at last he had seen the error of his ways and meant to reform and live like a good neighbour and Christian, he just—as if to annoy everyone—walks out in the middle of the ball and drowns himself. I call it a very bad joke.’

‘ We must not visit it upon his son, my dear,’ sleepily murmured the young lady’s

mother from beneath many coverings in her corner of the vehicle. 'Mr. Richard Saxby is a very presentable young man, and will be a good match now that he has come into possession.'

In the darkened house of Rookhurst, Richie was drinking and shivering in his own bed-room; the servants were carousing unchecked downstairs. That was all the mourning shown to Philip Saxby.

No, not all. In the justicing-room, where the bearers set down their dripping burden in haste as the apartment nearest the side-door, a sheeted mysterious object lay on the oaken table, whence law reports and papers had been hurriedly swept aside. And at its head by the gleam of two candles crouched a black figure; that of a middle-aged, heart-broken woman. Her light was gone out. Ill-favoured, cross-grained though she was, this un-

happy soul could love—had cherished a secret overmastering passion for years. Philip Saxby was for years past the house-keeper's idol, her Herod who spake as with the voice of a god; if he had known as much, he would have bidden her coldly to take up her abode elsewhere.

CHAPTER VII.

PHILIP SAXBY'S funeral took place with as much pomp of black long-tailed horses, mutes and mourners with drooping crape hat-bands, as money could command. There was no great show of attendant carriages from the neighbourhood around. The nearer squires came certainly, or sent representatives, but most made excuses who could decently do so. In spite of his son's determination to make Philip Saxby's death wear the appearance of accident, an uneasy feeling prevailed that the catastrophe had been exceedingly *mal à propos*, as Madame Dupré neatly put it. In any

case, the deceased having been far from popular since he came into possession of Rookhurst, there was honesty shown if no hypocrisy in slurring over the usual neighbourly formalities of condolence and attendance to the grave.

Nevertheless, thanks to the son's efforts to make a good display on the occasion, the funeral was a sufficiently imposing ceremonial. Richie himself, pale-faced, pink-eyed (the latter not wholly from grief, for each night his valet had sat up keeping him company over cards and wine till dawn, as the new master was afraid of being left alone in the silent house of death) Richie, with his head drooped and eyelids downcast, looked a picture of decent filial sorrow. Captain Ratcliffe, as chief friend of the dead man, took the place of second mourner, and all through that dismal week made himself Richie's

adviser and helpful daily companion. Ratcliffe was certainly a wonderful man of his age, as everyone agreed. He was an old young man, if the expression may be allowed, adored by all the young fellows near and far, who declared that Rat was as pleasant with them as if a boy himself, while his experience of the world and its wicked ways awed even Richie, fresh from university exploits of supposed dare-devil wickedness. Men of his own age liked the captain too; for it made them feel young to see his activity and keenness in all outdoor sports, despite that his once sandy hair had faded to pale orange shading into grey.

The funeral ended with all decorum, a party was now gathered at The Laurels. These were gentlemen who had silently accepted Ratcliffe's whispered invitation, all feeling that they could gossip more

freely in his parlour than at Rookhurst house itself over the strange incident of Philip Saxby's death.

Ratcliffe could throw no fresh light upon the subject ; it puzzled him as much as anyone. His friend, he owned, had grown morose and strange in manner during the last two years, nevertheless Rat stoutly asseverated the sad affair was an accident, and indeed believed as much. At moments he had even a faint glimmering that some curious coincidence might be established between the finding of the skeleton in armour at that precise spot in the moat, and Philip Saxby's own end at the same place. But being a man of strong common sense he dismissed the idea, though others who were more superstitious reminded each other with hushed voices, ' Do you recollect poor Hasledene's famous dinner when they all drank to the

skull that was found? They say Philip Saxby was very angry then. It was his ancestor who fell into the moat, and now Philip himself gets drowned in just the same way. Queer, eh? What do you make of it?’

Standing or sitting round the fire in The Laurels dining-room, after wine and cake had been duly partaken of, the various squires now began discussing the new owner of Rookhurst. In this Falconer took the lead, speaking from his own point of view as master of the hunt.

‘Well, Philip Saxby had his faults,’ declared the potentate of the hunting field. ‘A bitter bad friend he was too, to jolly George Hasledene, poor fellow; and there was an ugly look about the way he got possession of Rookhurst. Still, long ago he seemed a rare good chap when one met him at dinners or assizes, though he never

was much of a sportsman. He was far more of a man, I say, than this young spark who is always bragging about his horses—and has good ones, too, faith!—but has never been seen riding well forward to hounds yet.’

The M.F.H.’s young henchmen took up the cry like an obedient pack.

‘Richie has only been out five times this winter. Had a quinsy, the fellow said, and went about with his throat tied up in red flannel like any old woman. Somebody met him riding home one day on that young bay mare Bayadère he bought from you, squire; such a beauty! He said she was nervous, and would get among the hounds; he was afraid she might lame one of them. The truth was he was in a mortal fright himself. He got very angry when Dick Saxby offered to ride her for him if he would swop horses, for Dick

had only got the loan of an old screw from somebody that day. Wouldn't he have let the mare go just?'

'Why, where is Dick?' interrupted Falconer, in his portly voice, gazing at the group of young bloods. 'Not here? Of course not though; I remember. He could hardly attend the funeral of the man who shot his father.' This last in a lowered voice.

'Come,' intervened Ratcliffe, mildly, 'Richie Saxby and I are great friends, the best of friends, so don't decry the young fellow.'

Subdued laughter broke out in little bursts from the company at this. Falconer gave their host a hearty slap on the back.

'Tell us, Rat, with whom are you not great friends, eh, old boy? That's the question.'

Ratcliffe laughed himself at this flat-

tery, and his grey eyes, and white, even teeth gleamed in a genial good-chaps-all smile around.

The youngsters took up the topic in a chorus.

‘Richie is quite a ladies’ man,’ declared Bill Butler. ‘He talks muslin to them by the hour; I’ve heard him. He told Lady Althea at the ball that he knew to a penny how much her gown cost—nine shillings a yard. By George, he was right! I danced with her ladyship afterwards, and she quizzed him finely.’

‘And he advised my sisters upon the curl of their hair,’ grinned another.

‘Well, well, just you wait,’ said Ratcliffe, oracularly. ‘You’ll see before long, Richie will surprise you all. There will be changed times at Rookhurst. He’ll make the guineas fly; he’ll keep the ball rolling.’

And here it may be remarked, although forestalling the course of events, that in this Captain Ratcliffe proved a true prophet. Before two months were over, the household at Rookhurst was entirely changed; the old servants and dependents swept away. There arrived a French *chef* in the kitchen; the best vintages in the cellar were brought to light; pretty chambermaids flitted down the corridors; fresh pairs of thorough-breds, and new phaetons and curricles were bought every week, to be disposed of cheaply as better ones were brought from London for inspection. Richie continually ran up to town; when not there it seemed as if part of town ran down to him. For though he could not keep open house as yet, still college friends, watering-place captains, toadies of all kinds came to Rookhurst and less often went.

Miss Murdoch left the house the day after Philip Saxby's funeral. She resented any interference, it seemed, as Richie later intimated, with pursed lips and raised eyebrows; attempted, as such old housekeepers will, to show herself overbearing and obstinate. Nevertheless, he had pensioned her. Oh, he would not deal unhandsomely by the old scarecrow, and she had been given a house in the village.

To return to the week immediately following Philip Saxby's death.

Ratcliffe, who made himself overseer in a friendly way at Rookhurst while the orphan owner was supposed too downcast to be able to see into details himself, brought some news back to The Laurels one evening that gave him special concern. Old Amos Bird was found by his granddaughter the morning after his master's death, taken with a stroke of palsy in the bullocks' shed.

‘ You might go and see him, my dear. I am really grieved at the old man’s illness ; I am indeed,’ he said, addressing his niece.

Madame Dupré at that looked up with a furtive smile on her own pleasant face, but Ratcliffe sedulously avoided the duenna’s eye, as he stood warming his back at the grate with his coat-tails tucked up.

‘ I will go immediately—to-morrow morning, Uncle Pierce,’ answered Lucy, with warm sympathy. ‘ How frightened poor Patty must have been ! She is quite a favourite of mine, she is so pretty and quick in her ways. Much more intelligent than most of our good village girls. Madame Dupré, you like her too, don’t you ?’

‘ Why, yes, *mon enfant* ; I can get her to understand how to sew, and all those other little milliners are so slow, so slow. These

villagers of yours may be good, but are they *stupid?*' and madame spread out her plump fingers with a pretty gesture of impatience. 'I say, if she is half a gipsy, *tant mieux.*'

'I heard of it from "Black Jim," my late groom. How the news reached him, I can't say, down at his lonely "Who'd ha' thought it" inn. However, he is said to be courting your pretty favourite, Lucy, and ill news flies apace.'

Next morning the two ladies from The Laurels, warmly wrapped with fur pelisses and enormous muffs, betook themselves along the road to Amos Bird's cottage. Lucy carried a basket of creature comforts on her arm, besides a little book of spiritual consolation. She proceeded to read the latter to Amos as she sat by his bedside, and though the old man did not appear to give much heed to her sweet fresh voice,

nevertheless the attention on her part apparently pleased him. He dozed peacefully, but when her reading ceased he intimated she was at liberty to begin again.

Meantime madame beat an able retreat to the kitchen, gossip with Patty being more in her line. The girl seemed ill at ease, however, as the French lady glibly discussed recent Rookhurst events.

‘ You have a new master now, eh ? And he will marry some pretty young lady soon ; then there will be gay doings at the park.’

Patty, who had been moving restlessly about on pretext of seeing to the fire, caught her hand to her side just then with a movement of pain ; next dropped on a wooden chair, turning pale.

Madame Dupré jumped to her feet, looked about till she saw fresh water in a bucket, then dipped in a mug and brought it to the girl.

‘ You are faint. I can see you are not well. What is the matter ? ’

‘ I am quite well,’ said the girl, shortly, just touching the water with her lips ; then, with a laugh, forcing herself to her feet again. As madame still questioned, she went on, huffily,

‘ Others might be ill, too, if they’d to sit up with the old man these two nights and keep the house tidy, besides going down to see after the bullocks. For he nearly goes out of his wits if he thinks anyone else about Rookhurst will take his place with the oxen.’

‘ Have you got my sewing *jeeneeshed* ? ’

‘ Not yet, madam. It will be done by to-morrow.’

‘ Bring it, then. I did think it should be ended before now.’ Madame’s black eyes were fixed on the girl’s slight figure with close attention.

Just then Lucy came out from the inner room, and, hearing the last arrangement, offered to have jelly and soup ready for the invalid when Patty came next day. She spoke so kindly that the girl's handsome dark face, which had looked sullen under madame's displeasure concerning the delayed sewing, grew brighter.

Patty had a sincere, even ardent admiration for Miss Jennings. There was no young lady so kind or pretty anywhere near, she declared, and she secretly tried to copy Miss Jennings' air and walk, and even, let it not be laughed at, the set of her neck-handkerchief.

Next evening Patty Bird appeared duly at The Laurels bringing her needlework, and was soon sent for to the kitchen, and taken upstairs to Madame Dupré's room. The latter began fitting on a dress which needed alteration, and kept the neophyte

standing beside her for a long time, while she as high priestess volubly and kindly discoursed for the listener's benefit on the mysteries of this most ancient Eve's craft, not sufficiently honoured in England ; herself all the while ripping, pinning, and using scissors with dexterity. After half-an-hour Patty's voice, in the background, answered weakly ; there came a thump on the floor. Madame Dupré, turning her head sharply, saw the girl had fallen down in a faint. The French lady did not call out ; she simply nodded, as if expecting as much, quickly took some necessary measures of fresh air and restoratives, and presently Patty came to.

The little seamstress apologized shamefacedly, trying to laugh at herself. It was a queer thing, indeed ; she did not know how such foolishness could come over her. But she had been sewing close all day,

and there was grandfather ill, and the basket was that heavy to carry.

‘ Ah ! yes ; quite so,’ said madame, aloud. (Then to herself, ‘ Half-a-mile down the lane ! a strong country wench !’)

When Patty was recovered, being allowed to sit on a chair by madame’s condescension, they ended the discussion about the dress. Only then, madame looked her visitor straight in the face.

‘ You are better now ? That is well. But why should you faint twice, eh, Patty ?’ Then she made some close inquiries, taxed the girl upon various matters.

Patty glanced up in anger ; her gipsy eyes shot lightnings that would have scorched the Frenchwoman if they could. ‘ What right had she, on account of superior station, to go prying into other folks’ affairs ? It wasn’t the behaviour of a lady,

it wasn't.' (Patty apparently supposed that she herself was quite a judge on such matters.) Madame remained invulnerable, even smiled pityingly, almost kindly.

'That will do of foolish talk. Come, Patty, I like you. Do not be angry. You are a silly *leetle* one, and I know better than you do.'

So they went on; the girl protesting in useless discomfited anger, the elder woman persisting with philosophical phlegm.

Then poor Patty burst out in despairing defiance,

'You think you know a lot, madame, but you don't know all that's said about *this* house and the fine goings on here.'

'Bah! child, I know more than you perhaps think. No matter about this house. I say, I know you have a lover. Is he "Black Jim"?''

'There is nothing the matter with me,'

said Patty, desperately. 'Let me go now, madame.'

'Not yet;,' madame moved between her and the door. 'Foolish child, I want to be your friend. See, I will speak to Captain Ratcliffe, and he shall make Jim marry you.'

At that Patty fired up with scorn.

'Marry him, indeed! Me marry Black Jim! No, thank you, madam, the man who will marry me is a grand gentleman, let me tell you; and it will be soon too.'

'Oh—so! I am glad to hear it will be soon.'

At that down went Patty on her knees on the floor, plucking at madame's gown with imploring hands.

'Oh, madam, there is no use trying to deceive you. It is true; but don't tell Miss Lucy. I'd die of shame; indeed I would. But he has promised to marry

me; he has—he has. Grandfather would kill me, he would, once he knew. And I am afraid of the old man,' (shuddering), 'though he can hardly raise a finger since his stroke. But it will be all right when I have the ring on.'

'You are a fool. What gentleman is he?' asked madame, with harsh insistence. This changed the complexion of affairs.

She really liked Patty, who was more useful by far than the village mantua-maker, and she was disposed to condone easily what she would call a fault of youth and circumstances in one whose services it would be vexatious to relinquish. But now she scented a scandal, a secret, and was keen in her suddenly sharpened enquiries. As kindness had failed, she tried brow-beating; threatened Patty darkly if she did not at once confess. But Patty closed her mouth thereupon tightly, and said

never a word more. She rose to her feet, crossed her arms defiantly on her breast, then, as soon as she was permitted to do so, went away, disregarding all the warnings, remonstrances, and reproaches to which she had been forced to listen.

Madame remained alone and mused.

CHAPTER VIII.

NEXT night the two ladies of The Laurels were sitting on either side of a large table which supported a silver tea-urn and equipage, besides a tall moon-lamp. Lucy was bending over her embroidery-frame, putting in stitches slowly, very slowly. Yet she was smiling to herself, and now and again a dreaming look would come into her eyes. Then she would pause with her needle in mid-air, gaze into space, and seem blissfully unconscious of where she was and of her companion.

Madame, who had been giving her attention to the hissing tea-urn—of which

Lucy last night had turned the tap upon the waiting tea-pot, and then in a fit of abstraction suffered it to overflow—madame now resumed her netting, but, after a few stitches, began watching Miss Jennings. Presently she rose and examined the latter's embroidery.

‘Little one, you are putting the wrong shades in that tulip-leaf. See, actually blue for green!’ and she playfully patted Lucy's cheek. ‘Are you in love?’

With a start, the dreaming girl came back from far away, and raised dark disturbed eyes sweetly to her duenna.

‘How you startled me! I—’ she blushed, ‘I was only thinking. Are you sure about this leaf? Why, yes, indeed; but how alike these silks are by lamplight.’

Lucy was confused, but not unhappy. Madame's genial manner and warmth of sympathy had so engaged her liking that

she made a confidante of the elder woman in almost all things ; only not in one.

‘ Ah ! I guess ! ’ Madame Dupré laughed and shook her finger with an encouraging air. ‘ Mr. Saxby is a charming young man. I make you my compliments. Ha ! is it not so ? ’

How the gladness of love and youth made sudden glory in the fair young face opposite ! How the cherry lips parted with surprise ; and shyness in the beautiful eyes struggled with sudden pleasure at hearing the secretly worshipped lover’s name, at learning he stood so high in the opinion of others. Lucy was not mistaken then. He was a hero in the eyes of the world ; god-like among his fellows.

‘ Yes, yes. I have seen,’ went on madame, ‘ and of course though he can say nothing just now, *ma fille*,’ (Lucy bent nearer in quick understanding, her face

grew shadowed with faint apprehension while grateful for sympathy,) ‘still very soon he will come and ask for you. His mourning need not last many weeks, then you will be Mrs. Richard Saxby *mistress of Rookhurst.*’

‘*Mrs. Richard Saxby!*’ what a love-light at that flashed up in Lucy’s eyes; what a delicious tremor thrilled her frame. Even to herself she had hardly ventured to whisper yet that happy title. To hear it spoken aloud by another, and with certainty, was delightful.

But the last three words, ‘Mistress of Rookhurst,’ came like a thunderclap from a blue sky. All the glorious gladness died out of Lucy’s lips and eyes; she could hardly control herself enough to sit still, feeling suddenly pale and cold, her eyelids downcast seeking to avoid Madame Dupré’s searching scrutiny.

The door opened, and Ratcliffe came slowly in with a heavier step than was his wont. He flung the door to behind him carelessly so that his pet terrier following was caught and gave a howl of pain, for which the poor beast was sharply rated. As the captain strode to the fireplace and stood looking with puckered brow at the burning coals, both ladies saw that he seemed disturbed in mind. He had appeared so, indeed, several times since Philip Saxby's death, especially after returning, as now, from almost daily visits to Rookhurst!

The fact was that Rat was resolved to rule there as before; nay, if possible, more than before. But, though he piped playfully, Richie was not in all things amendable to dancing as the piper pleased. Richie's other friends—parasites, so Ratcliffe scornfully but inwardly stigma-

tised them—were anxious to gain rival supremacy, and though in the long run Rat told himself he would have the whip hand, yet it was a somewhat difficult game. Lucy was his chess-queen in this, though as yet propriety on account of Richie's mourning had prevented him from playing her. But now he was about to make a move on the chess-board.

‘By the way, Richie Saxby is coming up to-morrow for a bit of dinner quietly with us. He said he would like to try a song or two with you, Lucy, afterwards. Have you practised your duet of the “Battle of Prague”?’ Captain Ratcliffe said, looking up sharply.

‘No, Uncle Pierce,’ came in soft answer, while Lucy became uneasy as a fluttered bird.

‘And why not, pray? Richie spoke about it, I think, some time ago.’

‘ I meant to do so, Uncle Pierce,’ (in a still smaller voice,) ‘ but I don’t seem to have had the time as yet.’

‘ No ! Don’t seem to have had the time, Uncle Pierce,’ mimicked Ratcliffe, ‘ that’s rubbish, little girl. Well, then, you and he can try over that other song which you and Dick Saxby are so fond of.’

‘ Please, uncle, not “ Hark, hark, the lark ”—I’d rather try a new one.’

‘ Bless my heart !’ exclaimed Ratcliffe, losing his temper. ‘ What weather-cocks you girls are, veering round with every breeze. First you’ll do this, and then you’ll do nothing your parents or elders want at all. Did I not wish it, miss ? That ought to be enough. You had better learn that what I say has got to be done.’

With an angry movement of his foot he accidentally upset one of the high brass dogs so that the fire-irons fell rattling on

the hearth. Lucy's nerves must already have been slightly overwrought, for her guardian's unaccustomed anger and the jarring noise combined, made her burst into tears. She was crying very quietly, but a few bright drops fell upon her embroidery, so that she was obliged to use her cambric-laced handkerchief.

Rateliffe noticed the action, frowning his sandy eyebrows; he pished and pshawed.

‘What on earth is the matter with the silly creature now? Can a man not speak his mind but you women must go and make shower-baths of yourselves?’

Poor Lucy rose and with a prettily proud, yet withal modest, air asked leave to retire to her room.

‘Oh, if you mean to be a cry-baby, go by all means. There, there, child,’ as Lucy's pearl-like teeth bit her quivering under lip, ‘don't fret your old uncle with

fine-lady airs ; that's not like my own little girl. Go to bed and bring down a smiling face in the morning.'

As Lucy slipped out of the room like an April cloud, the two left behind turned and looked each other in the face.

'*Mon ami,*' said madame, speaking out straight, 'I do not find this new plan of yours good. You are too severe. She will only become obstinate and want her own way. That is how women feel.'

'It's all very fine for you to pick holes, Suzanne. Have I not reared and broken in the little filly without any help and, demme, it has not turned out so badly after all,' growled the old sailor, feeling his manner of training the young feminine mind impugned.

Madame Dupré was a woman who, when she said a thing, always stuck to her colours, and even whilst retreat-

ing fought her way slowly back inch by inch.

‘Lucy Jennings was a child then ; and easier to manage. Now she is a girl, and it is quite different ; she is a *demoiselle à marier*. Then, remember that she is a beauty ; admired ; reputed an heiress. With troops of young men to adore her, it is not pleasant to be scolded and ordered about like a spaniel by an old uncle.’

‘I have never been harsh before, but this shillyshallying makes me sick. If only Philip Saxby had not been such a fool, as to go breaking a hole in the ice and fall into it, all was going on swimmingly. He spoiled everything, his own plans as well as mine, by not swimming,’ and Rat laughing bitterly at his own harsh jest, threw himself into an arm-chair, crossed his legs and passed his hand wearily over his weather-beaten forehead.

‘Do ye know, I may lose my big Rookhurst fish ; my hook is not yet fast in his gills.’

‘Ah, he has other sport !’ significantly.

‘Eh—why ? what do you mean ?’

Madame began knitting rapidly. Mean-time she dropped a few sentences, mere hints, but enough to surprise the hearer, while speaking low and quietly with an air of being preoccupied with her work. Ratcliffe bent forward eagerly ; pooh poohed what she said ; nevertheless began hastily turning the matter over in his mind.

After a short silence he asked earnestly,

‘Are you certain ?’

‘Almost certain—yes.’

‘But it might not be young Richie after all. The girl would not tell, you say.’

‘Do you think I am foolish enough to put you on a false scent ? Listen : I have been considering it since yesterday. To-day I found out. The girl was wearing, I

noticed, a silk handkerchief round her neck tied nicely in a bow. She has good taste. When I admired it, she said it was a present; when I suggested from Jim, she tossed her head and said, "Perhaps." Well, now, see you here. To-day Black Jim comes to see you on—*business*. So I met him and said, like all you English people, "It is a fine day," to begin conversation; and so on till I asked him could he get me some silk handkerchiefs of a pretty sort, such as the one I supposed that he had given to Patty Bird. Get them cheap, *bien entendu*. He knows I *know*, and so he was not taken aback at that; but he stared at me, frowned, and said he had not given it, no; and that if he could find what other man had, who was making up to his sweetheart, he'd give him such a drubbing as would teach him a lesson. So I pretended a mistake; said

Miss Jennings might have given it; put him at peace. Well, this afternoon I walked up and down the lane twenty times outside the rectory gate where young Saxby had gone, Anne told me, to settle what virtues should be carved on his father's tombstone. Apparently there were so many, I got tired, so tired; but I persevered for your sake till Richie joined me. I did not know how to find out, when chance helped. His silk handkerchief hung half out of his pocket, and it was the very same pattern—little roses and leaves. To make sure I admired it, so he was flattered and displayed it, telling me how he had bought the set in London, where they were to be got at one particular shop.'

Madame paused, excited with the narration of her own cleverness, pleased at keeping Ratcliffe's eyes fixed on her in a stare of close attention and receiving his nod of approval.

Nevertheless, the man was disposed to attach less importance to the story than the woman; for presently he remarked, with an air of dismissing the subject,

‘After all, what does it matter if it is true? It makes no difference to us.’

‘*Pardon!*’ retorted his companion, with a slight contempt for this masculine crassness of perception. ‘If Lucy only knew it, it might make a very great difference. She is so delicate-minded that she would be shocked. A novice who is about to take the veil is not more innocent or sensitive. She has much yet to learn.’

‘Plenty of time for that; she is better now as she is, so pray leave that part of her education alone. Come, Suzanne, don’t be offended; I meant no rudeness *there*. Only, you see, I have brought up my little niece, and somehow have got to look upon her as if she was my own child. That’s

why I want her well provided for in marriage.'

'That you may keep the fortune you have got all to yourself with an easy conscience,' sneering.

'Yes; that's it. You've hit it,' in a dangerous tone of voice like the roll of thunder before a storm.

'Then I warn you that you bid fair to lose it,' cried madame, with her black eyes sparkling. 'She loves quite another—this handsome Dick.'

Ratcliffe started.

'I guessed as much. Are you sure of that too? I was afraid of this a year ago. How do you know?'

Madame shrugged her shoulders and opened her plump, well-shaped hands.

'How do I know? In a thousand ways. By her eyes when she looks at him; by her consciousness if she hears his name;

by the way she raises her head when his step sounds outside on the gravel, so that I guess it is he. Bah ! she has good eyes ; any other girl would do the same.'

Ratcliffe thrust his hands deep in his breeches pockets, and moved restlessly about the room.

'It will never do,' he kept muttering. 'She must be mistress of Rookhurst or take some other rich man. I can't afford to support her and her husband and a pack of children. What's to be done?'

After a while Madame Dupré whispered an answer to the last reiterated question.

'There is one thing that might be done. I can see no other way.'

She sat down over the fire and stared into the glowing coals. Ratcliffe drew up another chair, bent nearer to her ; then they talked low and still lower, in whispers, till the fire went out.

It was late when these two conspirators ended their confidential discussion.

‘Only be kind to the girl,’ warned madame, finally. ‘She is most easily worked upon through her affections.’

Ratcliffe rose and stood by the mantelpiece gnawing his under lip.

‘She is the easiest of the three to manage. If only Dick would have joined the army in Spain! But that widow woman his mother had to be reckoned with; and Richie is an egregious ass who won’t nibble the greens just because they are kept dangling before his very nose.’

‘You must play on some fresh string then with him, my friend. Let him believe some other rival will succeed. He is vain.’

‘Yes, vain to bursting point, and a coward as well. I must think it out. Good-night, Suzanne, your way may be

the right one; if so it will be my biggest *coup* yet to get Lucy safely installed as mistress down yonder.'

'And then? What shall be my reward, Pierce? Will you give me my right position in society?'

Ratcliffe hesitated, hemmed, and raised his eyes to the ceiling.

'Can we not let that question rest till this other affair is settled? I've had a deal of trouble in life, as you know. That's why, when things seem pretty quiet, a man ought to hesitate before being in a hurry to risk former unpleasantnesses being raked up. Still, I don't forget all you have done for me in the old days and now of late, Suzanne. Wait a while patiently and we will see.'

'How many years have I waited?' said the woman with suppressed, yet in a manner resigned, passion. 'Wait, wait,

wait! it has been always waiting. If I had not at last resolved what to do, and surprised you into recognizing me as an old acquaintance at Tunbridge Wells, would you ever have sent for me to come here?’

‘Of course I should,’ returned Ratcliffe, uneasily. ‘Did I not always promise that I would do so when things looked safe? As it is, there is mischief in the air. All the old gossips of women have been wagging their tongues about you these last months. That might grow dangerous, and my nerve has been failing me of late; it is not what it used to be.’

Madame Dupré’s lips parted ready to make the remark, ‘If so, two heads are better than one, and you will have me to take counsel with,’ but she kept back the words as her eyes rested on Ratcliffe’s troubled face, that looked suddenly aged,

almost beyond belief, now that his mask of smiling good fellowship and sprightliness was dropped.

A very curious softened change came over her face. Curious, because one might almost have sworn that tears dimmed the glittering brightness of her eyes.

Ratcliffe was moving towards the door with a weary air, when he sharply turned and asked,

‘You are quite sure that Lucy never meets this lad—Dick?’

‘Never. How could she? I have eyes not to be deceived. I never leave her alone for one minute of the day.’

CHAPTER IX.

A FEW days later the worthy Ratcliffe was picking his way down the muddy lane, towards evening, softly humming to himself a few bars of the 'Marseillaise' as he went. Near Amos Bird's cottage he looked sharply around. No one was in sight to witness the benevolence and condescension of his visit, therefore, being a modest man, he tapped on the door all the more briskly, and, without waiting for an answer, walked into the kitchen.

The old ox-herd was sitting alone over the fire in an arm-chair, so much recovered that he looked up quite keenly at his

visitor and made a pretence to rise, which Ratcliffe at once kindly stopped.

‘ You are better, my old friend, I see ; and very glad I am to see it. But why are you alone ? Where is your granddaughter ? ’

Old Amos explained that Patty was gone down to the park to see after the oxen ; so she had ; ay ! to put them to rights for the night. He was almost well enough to go himself ; however, the wench persuaded him to stay for this one day more, and he could trust her.

‘ You can trust her with the oxen, you mean, to feed them and look after them ; but can you trust the girl to take care of herself ? ’ and, scraping the chair he had taken along the kitchen floor, Ratcliffe sat down close to Amos and looked him, with a peculiar expression, in the face.

‘ What’s up, captain ? ’ whispered the

grandfather, becoming alert at once. 'Speak out plain. I thought you wanted a helping hand with the oxen one night. What are you driving at?'

'I want no help just now, old friend; but I've come to give you a word or so of advice that may be useful. Don't send your Patty too much down to Rookhurst Park by herself. There, now, don't be too hard on the girl. She's young, remember; we were all young once. But listen,' this very slowly and impressively, 'unless I am greatly mistaken, some one else has been helping Patty to see to those beasts lately.'

'Eh?' The old patriarch sat almost upright in his elbow-chair, grasping its wooden arms, while anger began to light up his bleared eyes, hitherto so dull and sunken.

'Some one else—courting her, you

mean, captain? Is it not Black Jim? She's promised to Jim. And what man dare meddle with my oxen? I thought they was too feared. I warned them, if they interfered, I'd put such a charm on any man——'

'Never mind charms;' Ratcliffe briefly interrupted the ancient's simmering wrath. 'It may be some one, Amos, who has got more right than even you to see after the oxen if he chooses. Listen.' He bent his head and whispered in the aged ears that were still sharp and cunning of hearing. Before the tale-bearer ended, old Amos gave a hoarse cry of rage and raised his withered hand in cursing.

'If it is so, I'll punish her, the hussy; I'll teach the slut a lesson she'll not forget to her dying day. *And as to him!*' There followed a string of curses almost unintelligible with hatred.

Speaking in the dialect of the peasants of the Kentish Weald, which it has not seemed necessary to set down here, it being too uncouth for most readers' apprehension, Amos seemed using a strange tongue, and even Ratcliffe, who thought he knew the shibboleth like any native, was at fault. Afraid that the old man would have a second stroke from over-excitement, the inexperienced parish visitor tried soothing.

'You are not certain yet. Be calm, man; be calm! First make sure . . . Yes, that's it;' for Amos had got on his feet, and snatched up his stick and hat.

Borne up by rage and eager desire to know if this startling suspicion were true, that shame had come to sit down by his hearth-stone, the old herd hobbled out of the cottage and crossed the road to the Rookhurst farm gate; then went down

through the woods by a path his own daily steps had worn during the years of a lifetime.

The Rookhurst stables lay almost enclosed by a wood that filled the valley behind the house. To the rear of this again was the ox-shed; for the noble team of black draught animals, no less than hunters or carriage-horses, had always been considered as belonging directly to the household. All the other cattle, cart-horses, pigs and poultry, were kept at the home farm at some distance. Perhaps for this reason Amos secretly used to consider his dignity as not altogether unequal to that of the coachman or stud-groom. And in olden days Hasledene amused himself by humouring the faithful retainer's whims till Amos almost grew to think that the possession of Rookhurst depended superstitiously upon his team of black oxen

never failing in number ; the legend having become firmly rooted in the minds of the family and neighbouring peasantry that while the black oxen were at Rookhurst, the Saxbys would keep the land. In the ignorant dim recesses of his mind, the patriarch was therefore a grand vizier to the family. Their fate in a manner reposed in his keeping, and the kindness they all showed him in former days was a debt of gratitude, devolving upon Philip Saxby in turn, which the latter considerably neglected.

True, the late master had had enough superstitious feeling himself to keep old Amos, and not suffer him to be interfered with. None the less, growing more cranky with years, Amos Bird bitterly regretted his kind mistress and handsome Squire Hasledene ; considered himself slighted ; his son shamefully dismissed ; and with

smouldering hate in his heart prayed to see the day when young Master Dick might get his own again. The ox-shed was their driver's vizier's palace ; the oxen his guard of honour, his best friends, the pride of his heart. He felt himself indeed equal to their owner.

Thick brushwood and trees, as has been said, surrounded two sides of the ox-shed, and Amos's track led through a lonely part of the woods. Behind him Captain Ratcliffe apparently felt it a humane duty to follow, yet was perhaps half ashamed of the self-imposed task, for he kept looking round with a careless seeming, yet keen glance ; his eyes diving into the near shrubbery, exploring the occasional vistas of the woods. A few yards before approaching the shed Amos stood still, sheltering his ear with his hand to listen for the faintest noise around, then he looked back between

the trees. In the distance Ratcliffe gave him an encouraging signal to proceed. Thereupon, bending double, the old man dived into the shrubbery of laurels. Evidently he was following some track which he knew as well as a rabbit does its run, for close though the laurels grew all round he made his way surely under the boughs, leaving no trace of his passage. Ratcliffe strolled leisurely after to the very same spot; looked once more sharply around, then, being certain he was unobserved, ducked his head and likewise disappeared.

Fifty feet further in this dense thicket Amos at last re-emerged close beside the wall of the shed, which was made of upright wooden posts. With trembling hands the old man began fumbling at two of these. A minute later Rat's beaver rose out also among the glossy broad leaves.

Silently his stronger hands pushed back the boards that worked upon a hinge ; the pressure of hay at the back had prevented them from yielding to old Amos's feeble strength. Through the small aperture now made, both men entered the shed softly behind a shelter of up-piled hay near the wall.

A murmur of two voices reached their ears from beyond a manger.

The voices were those of a man and a woman, that much was audible ; also the latter was pleading in its tone, even imploring ; the former curt, impatient, as if in haste to be gone. Ratcliffe could just distinguish the words ; for his hearing was as sharp as that of an animal ; but Amos put his hand up to his ear in vain, shook his aged head, then plucked his companion's sleeve. Ratcliffe answered the old man's questioning eye and gesture by

a solemn nod, as much as to say, 'It is he.'

Amos Bird quivered with rage under his smock frock; he bent forward, uselessly longing, straining to hear. In the aged peasant's dull mind a full understanding had dawned by degrees, as he hobbled down the well-known path through the wood. His mind was slow—very slow to receive a new idea. Minute by minute it strove to digest the bitter hard lump of ill news it had been forced to receive. Now the gall was working, spreading like poison in his veins, burning in his heart like hell fire. He was old, very old, but he had been respected, ay, and feared, most of his long life. Amos was glad to be feared, for vaguely he had looked out on the world, perceiving that other men were born rich and enjoyed good things all their lives, while he lived by the sweat of his brow and went about doubled by rheumatics.

Therefore he hated these great ones of the earth, excepting the rightful Saxbys, who had always singled him out for favour. He also hated Philip Saxby stupidly, unreasoningly; but that feeling was mild compared with the savage thirst for revenge that now entered into him like an evil demon.

Patty was the grandfather's one ewe lamb. Amos was proud of the handsome black-eyed lass, who had grown up so straight and strong and slim, and kept herself to herself almost fiercely, compared with the more stolid class of village girls about her. Now that Ebenezer, his boy, was dead, Patty was the only creature left of his family. She kept his cottage tidy, she nursed him, she was his slave, his treasure, his own flesh and blood. Jim admired her, and Black Jim was a great personage in old Amos's eyes; he was only second indeed to the captain.

Jim in a sense was the ox-herd's acknowledged superior; was a hero, a man of mettle—and what other dared put his affront upon them both, grandfather and lover? *What man? Augh!* if indeed it turned out to be this white-livered cur of a Saxby, now owner here, Amos Bird felt that he could grip his false throat and choke the life out of him, even with these withered, palsied fingers.

If so,—was this the son's revenge for the father's death under the ice? The old man had felt strangely confused coming through the trees, which seemed to talk to him and tell him they knew all about that dark winter night. Nay, but they need not rustle their leaves at him, he had never rightly killed Philip Saxby; not so much as laid a finger upon him. Folk could prove nothing; they might try to take the law of him. Then snarling to himself, like

a wolf robbed of its cub, it seemed clear as daylight that he had done well and righteously not to warn Philip Saxby if the latter's son was fated to do himself, Amos, this villainous wrong.

What were those two whispering over there, beyond the manger? He must get nearer; he must overhear at all hazards. Getting down on his knees stiffly, the old man stretched himself flat on the litter, and began crawling forward yard by yard. Then reaching Joey's pen, where this biggest ox lay chewing the cud, a huge bovine mass of placid contentment, the eaves-dropper wriggled between the animal and the wall. As he lay crouched there, he was only hidden by a low wooden partition from Billy's pen, behind the manger of which the two speakers were standing.

There was no need of seeing, the grandfather could hear Patty's voice pleading

in short gasps of entreaty, as if fearful of offending some tyrant who was her soul's master.

‘Don't go away, Mr. Richie! Only listen to me a minute; just one minute, for pity's sake. It is so hard to see you these days. If you leave me now——’

‘Go on! What a confounded time you take about speaking. I've come just to escape a row like the last one, when you stood and cried on the roadside, and anyone might have seen you. But I'm not going to stay here all the evening.’

‘I could not tell you then, because you would ride on; but I've wanted to speak to you so terribly these last weeks. Oh, Mr. Richie—listen——’

The girl dropped her voice low, and murmured passionately.

‘*What!*’ exclaimed the young man, with angry surprise, followed by a jeering laugh.

‘So you actually expect me to—oh, ha, ha, ha!—to marry you? By Jove, for cool, calm assurance, commend me to this brazen-faced gipsy!’

‘But you promised me. You don’t mean to say that you would desert me now? Oh, my God!’ cried the girl, in the sharp clear tones of agony that come to every woman in extremity of trouble. ‘You can’t break your word. You said, on your honour as a gentleman, you would make a lady of me.’

‘What I said then can’t hold good now,’ retorted Richie, curtly, with exasperated decision. ‘Matters were very different before my father died. Now I have my position to think of, and must keep it up.’

‘You said before, it was because your father would be angry. You put me off and off, and I believed you. You’re a liar! There’s for you!’

‘Hoity-toity, lass! you’re a greater fool than I ever took you for, pretty fool though I thought you,’ replied Richie, with a pale evil smile. Then swelling his chest and putting his hat slightly on one side with a rakish air, as if to remind himself that he was a man of the world, he slowly, deliberately flung his last words in her face like so many scornful missiles. ‘If ever I did mean anything of what I said, I don’t now. *There’s for you!*’

Patty wrung her hands together, stretched them clasped towards the sky with a gesture of despairing supplication.

‘What shall I do? what shall I do? What will become of me? Grandfather will kill——’ she broke off short with a scream of terror.

The girl’s cry was drowned in a hoarser sound, like the howl of a beast. Beyond Joey’s slumbering, mountainous form a

bowed, smock-frocked old man had risen up. His gaping, toothless mouth worked frightfully, speechless with rage, till at last the words burst out in a shriek.

‘Villain scoundrel! I’ll pay you off for this. I’ll lay a black curse upon you, that you’ll die before the year is out. I’ll—oh, *my God!*’ There came a horrible despairing cry, that died into a weak gurgle.

The hearers’ hearts ceased to beat a moment; their knees quaked. For Joey, the young ox, alarmed by the unusual noise around, had risen up; then, noticing the figures beyond the manger, backed from them, bearing with all his huge weight upon Amos, and crushing the old man against the wall.

CHAPTER X.

PATTY filled the air with piercing shrieks, as bravely springing forward she caught the ox by his curving horns. But Joey only bent his massive head, her feeble strength availing naught to stir him.

Richie stood paralysed, not stirring a finger, although she cried to him for help. But at that terrible moment a sharp shower of prods from an ox goad was delivered, coming from an unexpected hand. The ox hastily retreated, and Ratcliffe appeared before Patty's astonished gaze, calling the girl authoritatively to help him in

dragging her grandfather backwards into safety.

Meanwhile, Patty's shrieks had reached as far as the stables, and brought some helpers running, who gathered in a shocked, gaping group, asking questions that no one answered.

Ratcliffe was kneeling by Amos Bird's prostrate figure, loosening his worsted comforter and feeling for his heart.

'I am afraid his ribs are broken; but he is breathing still. There, Patty, he is not dead, lass. Stop crying, and bring some water,' he announced, kindly, though with authority.

At this Richie, who had till now remained a limp, horror-stricken figure, deemed it incumbent to assert his presence. He strutted forward with an air of forced familiarity and swagger, though he looked white.

‘Well, Rat, you appeared just in the nick of time, old fellow. But may one inquire what the deuce you were doing here?’

‘Stow your questions and stand out of the way. Don’t you see that the old man wants air,’ came in bluff answer. Then, in a lower tone, and so sternly that Richie could hardly believe his ears, ‘You fool! Do you want all these men to know what brought about this accident? Can’t you see that Amos Bird is dying, and you are the cause of it?’

Richie drew back cowed, while with quick, dexterous hands Ratcliffe went on attending to the old man, who presently revived.

‘Captain, it’s you,’ he feebly faltered. ‘Where are the—other boys? I’m going fast—oh!’

The crowd about the shed was always

increasing, as the news spread like wild-fire. Almost all the servants flocked from the house attracted by the tragedy. Presently appeared also the figures of Dick Saxby and Bill Butler, who had just come in company to pay a formal afternoon call at Rookhurst, which for some days past they felt propriety demanded of them. Dick Saxby's big figure parted the crowd easily, as he shouldered forward like a giant among lesser men.

‘Hullo, Richie, how awful this is! We came to pay you a visit, and have only just heard that you were all out here and what had happened,’ he exclaimed, with agitation. ‘I don’t know when I have been so shocked. You won’t mind my staying, Richie, will you? Amos and I have always been such friends.’

Without waiting for further permission, Dick knelt down by the old man’s side,

looked in the leaden-hued, withered visage sorrowfully ; then suddenly he urged,

‘ Send for the rector. He is as good as Dr. Twigge any day. Look sharp.’

‘ It’s no good. Go yourself, if you are so anxious,’ growled Richie, in answer. He had ill borne Ratcliffe’s assumption of command, and now hated still more Dick’s interference.

‘ You can’t leave this poor man to die without a clergyman, and Dr. Butler can give help both to soul and body, as we all know,’ burst out Dick, sharply.

An approving murmur came from the by-standers.

‘ I’ll go myself,’ offered Bill Butler, eagerly. But two light-footed lads, a footman and garden boy, had already started off running.

Although urged forward by some of the maids, Patty Bird would not come under

her grandfather's eye, but crouched behind, sobbing as if her heart would break.

‘Master Dick,’ murmured the old herd, faintly, opening his filming eyes, and recognising with gratification Dick’s face that was bent over him. ‘Are you there? That’s right . . . *Master*, I’d like the oxen to carry me to my grave; I would. They know me.’

‘You hear,’ said Dick, as kneeling on one knee he turned his head towards his cousin earnestly. ‘Promise him that what he wants shall be done.’

Richie stood, a sullen and wavering figure with irresolute underlip.

‘Say yes,’ Dick sternly insisted. ‘Can you refuse a dying man’s wish?’

A distinct murmur of indignant feeling came from all the spectators, mingled with suppressed groans and sighs from the

women, while Patty's sobs were painfully audible.

'All right then. Yes. I don't care,' answered Richie, with sullen assent.

So it was Dick Saxby who spoke loudly in Amos Bird's dull ears, fast closing to earthly sounds.

'The team of oxen shall carry you at your funeral, Amos. You shall have them all, the whole eight. Can you hear me?'

'Ah, thank ye, master. The team—all.'

Those were the last intelligible words that came from the old ox-herd.

When Dr. Bird strode hastily into the shed, some twelve minutes later, only a painfully breathing, crushed form lay there, past all speech, or prayer, or hearing of consolation.

Ratcliffe, who remained standing aside with folded arms, surveying the scene, a

keenly interested but dispassionate observer, stepped forward before the end came. Linking his arm in that of Richie, he said, in friendly tones,

‘There is no use in staying longer. You look shocked, and no wonder, at losing such a faithful old servant. But he is in good hands ; let me persuade you to come back to the house. You have done all that a master can. Leave the rest to Dr. Butler and all these good fellows.’

Nothing loth Richie departed with his considerate companion, and in this friendly fashion they went through the stable-yard, and round to the front of the house. Once in his own study Richie was immensely relieved, and opening a private case of spirits offered Ratcliffe some brandy, and tossed off himself two small glasses neat.

‘That pulls one together ; my nerves were a trifle shaken. What a horrid scene!’

he said, beginning to recover himself, though his face was still very white, and his hands shook. 'You were by, captain, I believe,' trying an air of bravado. 'You know it was all purely an accident.'

'If there is an inquest, as I suppose,' smiled Ratcliffe, cynically, 'I am ready to bear witness to what truly occurred.'

'Bless my soul, you don't mean to say that is necessary?' Richie looked as if the suggestion made him feel sick. Then attempting a laugh, 'Why, after all, who cares, excepting the old man's granddaughter? And the funeral expenses, and some money in her pocket, will dry her tears fast enough.'

'Are you sure of that? Take care, Richard Saxby, you are in such danger now as you do not guess. Your very life is not safe.' Then, as his hearer stared at him in disbelief, yet apprehension, Rat-

cliffe stepped forward whispering in a low impressive tone, 'Have you no idea what old Amos was in the country side, as well as your father's ox-herd?'

'O, if you mean that he practised witchcraft——'

'I mean more than that. He was one of the Hawkhurst gang of smugglers. You know it is rumoured that there are at least thirty of them, desperate men. They may—it is most likely they will—take their revenge upon you.'

'But how? How—how? Ratcliffe, be reasonable. How can they tell? I swear I had no hand in his death. Why should they visit this thing on me?'

'Don't swear, Richie; I know too much. Patty will tell them what happened, and Black Jim is her sweetheart. He is a man who stops short at nothing, so look out for yourself one of these dark nights.'

‘Black Jim who keeps the “Who’d ha’ thought it” inn? Is he one of them?’

‘He is said to be their leader.’

‘Then—then—I’ll inform upon them. I’ll go to Falconer. I am to be made a Justice of the Peace shortly myself. I’ll speak to Dr. Butler. Why, we must raise the neighbourhood against the fellows and clap the whole posse of them into prison. But you, Ratcliffe, if you knew all this, why the devil did you not have them arrested before? Eh? Why? What are you smiling at?’

For Ratcliffe’s mask-like features had now taken a sardonic expression; quite a devilish glitter was in the grey eyes that seemed to pierce Richie’s wretched soul through and through.

‘Because,’ in slow accents, ‘I did not wish to inform against my old friend Philip Saxby, Esquire, of Rookhurst Manor, Jus-

tice of the Peace. How do you think that his oxen and his men could have been used many a winter's night to convey the smuggler's cargoes without his knowledge. Yes, young man, but trust old Pierce Ratcliffe to keep his tongue between his teeth. And I know this: that, when Black Jim once learns the truth about his sweetheart Patty Bird, you are as good as a dead man. Stop, sir; no good trying bluster, or talking about putting Jim in gaol; it can't be done. He would turn King's evidence and disgrace your father's name. Besides, you couldn't arrest the man on mere suspicion, and if once the matter got bruited abroad, this gang has such a system of communication with each other that he will be clear across the Channel before you can get to his house.'

Richie sat down on a chair, the picture of abject fear.

In those days smuggling was carried on in the Weald of Kent, to the disgrace of the county. For years some of its gangs were an actual terror to the well-disposed. They went in such numbers that it was not safe for small knots of volunteers to dare oppose them, and they had a way of vanishing before the appearance of constables or coastguards that was little short of miraculous.

Ratcliffe watched the younger man with a faint sneer. He had lied to him in respect of Philip Saxby's knowledge of the smugglers, but what he had said of Amos and Black Jim was strictly true.

'I say, captain, you seem to know a lot,' faltered Richie. 'What if—if you were to be suspected yourself of having a hand in these doings?'

'I should challenge any gentleman who said so, and blow his brains out. I am

happy to say that my aim is pretty accurate still.' And Ratcliffe, who was a notoriously good shot, smiled pleasantly. Then, suddenly altering his tone, 'Come, young man, don't waste your breath on an old fellow who does not value his life one jot, and had endangered it fifty times before you were born. The matter lies thus : I don't mind standing by you through this affair, for the sake of old friendship to your father and liking to yourself ; but you will soon have a deadly enemy in Jim Lee, who will follow you like a sleuth-hound, trust a half-gipsy for that, till your life is not worth a rap, unless——'

' Unless what ? ' Speak out, Captain Ratcliffe ! Do help me like a friend.'

' Unless you saddle the wrong horse. There may be two Richards in the field.'

Both men drew a long breath and looked at each other.

CHAPTER XI.

IT was the day when Amos Bird's strange funeral was fixed to take place. The sun was shining, although a black frost had bound the earth with bands of iron for some days past. The roads were dry and not unpleasant for walking, either, as Anne Butler found when she started from the rectory about two o'clock to pay her friend Lucy Jennings a visit.

She had not seen the latter for three days past which, in so small a neighbourhood, was unusual; but she was also stirred to call for a still stronger reason. The evening before Dick Saxby had spent at

the rectory. Then in the interval, between a rigorous game of whist (with the proper accompaniments of a clean-swept hearth and brisk fire) and the announcement of supper, he managed to ask Anne privately whether she knew why Miss Jennings had not been at church last Sunday.

‘ My mother bid me ask, for she is very uneasy,’ explained this artful lover. ‘ She will have it that Madame Dupré is like a bad fairy who is putting some spell on the little princess there. Seriously, Anne, my mother is concerned whether with or without cause. You know that Lucy and yourself are her two favourites, so you will do her a kindness by inquiring. She is huffed with madam and does not care to go herself, having been denied admittance at The Laurels yesterday, although she is convinced that the French lady and Lucy were both in the house.’

For this reason Anne Butler is stepping smartly on her way this day. A fine, tall, young woman she looks, with her plentiful fair hair coiled in thick plaits under her bonnet; comely, grey-eyed, with an honest fearless glance for everyone. Anne was liked, yet slightly dreaded by the young men and even maidens in the neighbourhood; she was so sober, too thoroughly in earnest, they said. Perhaps being obliged to bend her neck so early to the yoke of domestic management had lost her the merry knack, which other girls keep longer, of chattering together like happy sparrows and fluttering inconsequently from one topic to another. In conversation Anne gave gold and silver where only small change was expected by the good-humoured young folk about her. Also she disliked scandal, even gossip, and though of a serene presence was wont to grow indignantly

scornful when her tolerant mind was shocked by harsh judgment of others.

As Anne went briskly along, the keen wind blew roses on her cheeks and brightened her eyes. Her breast expanded with the healthy pleasure of living. She looked about her with a glad feeling that even in frosty winter weather the world was beautiful and friends many and dear; especially some few whom she cherished deep in her heart. She was very glad to oblige Dick in his slightest wish, for he was still her best friend of all—and what an excellent son to his mother!

The latter was surely slightly fanciful concerning Lucy, for Catherine Saxby still retained some of her romantic imagination. But Anne knew that her old friend was so engrossed between the daily routine at Forge Farm and devotion to Dick that the reserved, somewhat melancholy-minded

woman had neither opportunities nor the wish to make fresh friends ; therefore she was the more anxious over and fond of the small number that remained to her. Anne smiled to herself at the bare idea of Madame Dupré tyrannising over merry, saucy Lucy. Nevertheless, Miss Butler was uneasily aware that Lucy, who was her dearest friend, had seemed less gay than usual of late.

As Anne arrived at The Laurels, two gentlemen were just mounting their horses in the act of taking their departure. One of these visitors was the colonel of a dragoon regiment quartered near; a handsome young officer who had distinguished himself during the Spanish campaign, having landed at Lisbon as a lieutenant and found himself in command of the regiment after Vittoria. The other was Lord John de Voeux, who had ridden over on the pre-

text of bringing his sister Lady Althea's compliments and some trivial message. He had paid a visit on some equally flimsy excuse only a few days before. When Anne entered the morning-room, she began rallying Lucy on her admirers.

‘What, two more of them ; fresh swains added to the previous train ! My dear creature, will you never be satisfied with the number of your conquests ? You are insatiable, I declare ; a female despot. We shall all be obliged to combine against you, like the allies against Buonaparte.’

Lucy, who looked slightly pale but even prettier than usual, placed her friend on a settee and made her take off her fur tippet.

She replied, with a careless air,

‘I would as soon they stayed away, I assure you, dear Anne. I am positively indifferent to their visits.’

‘The ground is too hard for hunting,

they say,' Anne continued, slyly, 'so perhaps that is why these gentlemen exercise their horses so far. How many miles have they come? Ten—twelve?'

'Ah!' briskly interposed Madame Dupré, 'they may ride, even from Lonndonn, all the way; that will not help at all. Lucy is, how do you say it, a home-bird; she does not wish to be tempted to pretty cages at a distance. Her nest shall be quite, quite near,' shaking her forefinger archly, 'in *beauteeful* woods.'

Lucy's pallor was now exchanged for a faint pink flush, the traitorous revelation of some inner trouble. She hastily began offering her visitor wine and cake at least, if the latter would not take cold meat, from a tray that had been brought in for the previous guests.

Anne accepted this luncheon, and meanwhile started an energetic discussion upon

the Sunday-school. Her conversation was interrupted in a few minutes by sounds from the road outside, while at the same time a single repeated stroke from the church-bell in the distance announced that Amos Bird's funeral had begun.

Attracted by curiosity, the ladies went outside on the gravel sweep and looked through the scroll-work of the iron gates. Soon a strange procession came in view. The full team of Rookhurst oxen were plodding along the road, their pace naturally adapting itself to a solemn slowness. By way of a funeral car they drew the tug, or farm waggon with open sides, that was used to convey the heaviest loads. This the Rookhurst labourers had covered, out of respect for their comrade, with a thick layer of pine branches, while the axle-trees of the wheels were similarly decorated with laurels. Upon this evergreen plat-

form rested the coffin of the village patriarch. It was a good oak coffin, too, as many of the mourners whispered with satisfaction among each other, and Mrs. Saxby and Master Dick at Forge Farm had paid for it as a tribute of regard to their former dependent's memory.

The crowd that followed this extraordinary hearse was the largest ever gathered together in the neighbourhood since Squire Hasledene's funeral. Could old Amos have seen it, his heart would have swelled with pride to think that a far greater number accompanied him to the grave than his late master, Philip Saxby. Jim Lee walked directly behind the coffin in the post of chief mourner. This was by rights Patty's place, for the dead man had no other living relation except his grandchild; but the poor girl was reported too ill to come, and even the village gossip

excused her on the ground of the terrible upset her mind must have had on seeing, with her own eyes, her grandfather crushed to death. Behind Jim came a group of men who were eyed somewhat suspiciously by many of the Rookhurst inhabitants. They were not of the neighbourhood, although they seemed fairly well known: and some significant whispers and nudgings passed around. The individuals in question, though aware of this, only swaggered a little the more in their demeanour, being hardy-looking fellows, better dressed than most of their detractors, and with a slightly sea-faring aspect that told its own tale to those who understood.

Before the funeral had passed quite out of sight, Lucy, who had only put on a pelisse and wore her house-shoes, began shivering violently, and was taken with such a severe fit of coughing that the

three ladies returned in haste to the house.

‘*Hé!* what a funny sight! and yet I have seen some strange ones in France,’ remarked madame, significantly, still gazing out of the window. ‘But is he not generous, this young Mr. Richie? is he not a Prince Charming to give such a fine funeral to that old scarecrow? Ah, he has a good heart!’

‘Yes, indeed,’ chimed in Anne, with genuine assent. ‘I have frequently thought that Richie has been very unjustly derided because Nature has made him less handsome than some other young men. My father has been much pleased, I know, with the respect Richie has shown to Mr. Philip Saxby’s memory; and this is another proof to my mind that we have all been somewhat hasty in thinking him a mere fop, a harmless rattle.’

Anne rather impulsively backed Madame Dupré, because it really pleased her to try to think kindly of her neighbour. Being a large-minded girl, as has been said, with a great scorn of evil judging, this last characteristic often led her to uphold persons against adverse criticism or scandal, even when the indictment often proved afterwards to have been true. Now, however, restraining her wish to champion the young man of whom she felt Lucy was inclined to think less well than was absolutely fair in Anne's opinion, she began once more the subject of the Sunday-school.

‘As I was saying just now,’ she started off in preamble, to a ‘weak, washy, everlasting flood’ of parish-pump mental refreshment.

After a few minutes, Madame Dupré made various attempts to change this

humdrum topic. In vain ; Anne persisted in inflicting upon Lucy's civil attention quite trivial incidents of the various good or bad behaviour of the children, followed by dismal accounts of whooping-cough, measles, and mumps. Lucy listened, being too kind-hearted to appear uninterested in her friend's apparently engrossing hobbies, although she found herself secretly wishing that Anne would be less desperately devoted to parish work. Madame fidgetted ; yawned once or twice behind her plump, jewelled hand, then with the utmost politeness invented an excuse to leave the room. As she turned her back, a smile broke out on Anne's face. As the door closed, her smile broadened. Breaking off the subject abruptly, the visitor burst into hearty laughter, as soon as she judged madame out of earshot.

‘ Famous ! dear Lucy ; I have bored your

sheep-dog into trotting away. Now, my dear, we can chat as freely as we please. Not that I dislike Madame Dupré individually ; only that third persons in general are disagreeable when friends like you and me want to talk comfortably together.'

' You clever creature ! I protest you took me in also,' cried Lucy, beginning to brighten.

She laughed too, but upon that began to cough so violently that Anne became quite uneasy.

' Dear Lucy, how have you contrived to catch such a dreadful cough ?'

' I really cannot say. It has been such severe weather. But, oh ! I do so wish that my cold would go, that I could get out once more. It is so trying to be penned indoors, instead of enjoying oneself, and seeing one's friends.'

' Why, all *your* friends come to visit you

in troops, I should think,' Anne rallied her.

Lucy dropped her black eyelashes. She could not say just then, that the one being she longed to see in the wide world was practically prevented from paying any but the most formal visit at The Laurels. Whenever Dick Saxby called, her uncle was sure to appear unexpectedly, and under the eyes of both the latter and Madame Dupré it was impossible for the lovers to exchange the merest glance or faintest syllable of understanding. Then Ratcliffe would gaily urge Dick to come into the captain's own room for a bout with the foils, or a turn with the gloves; and Saxby, anxious to secure the good graces of his love's guardian, felt reluctantly obliged to accept. Neither could she confess that she had caught her cough by stealing out at five o'clock one morning

last week, when a black frost was on the ground, and a bitter chill in the air. It was cruelly cold as she waited under the bare trees for Dick to clamber down ; and how terrified she felt lest he might fall in that perilous ascent and descent, when his fingers were chilled, and the branches of the trees quite slippery with frost. Many a day they two had thus met through these dark, cheerless, winter mornings, till now poor Lucy was too ill to venture out ; and she was pining for news of Dick ; did not even know how anxious her lover also was upon her account.

‘ I am truly distressed to see you so unwell, my dear,’ said Anne, seriously. ‘ Besides, it strikes me, that you are somewhat out of spirits. Can you assure me, Lucy, that nothing else is the matter ? You know what a true friend I am to you, I hope.’

‘ I know that. Yes, indeed ; I am sure of it, dear Anne.’

So saying, Lucy looked absently out of the window, tears rising in her eyes. She sighed, tapped a table close by with her taper fingers, yet kept hesitating whether to tell aught or naught. Lucy loved Anne, trusted her ; nevertheless, she had not Dick’s sanction to speak, and had always obeyed him implicitly. On the other hand, he had not actually forbidden her a confidante, and his little sweetheart was longing to whisper her trouble in some friendly tuft of rushes.

Anne cut the matter short by seating herself close to Lucy’s side, and putting her arm round the latter in an affectionate embrace. The action was enough to break down the lonely girl’s silence ; the warmth of that caress unthawed Lucy’s maidenly reserve, brought tears and speech.

With a feeling of relief she faltered forth, glancing in a frightened way towards the door, and with downcast eyes, yet swift occasional looks raised in appeal like vistas of rain-washed sky.

‘How did you guess so rightly, Anne? It is quite true, I am not happy of late; indeed, I am miserable. It is all on account of Mr. Richie Saxby, dear,—never joke me about him before madame any more. They both, she and my uncle, I mean, are so bent on my accepting him; for Richie has been paying me particular attention for some months past.’

‘Then you dislike him? I am very sorry if I have complicated matters by speaking in his favour just now.’

‘Why should I dislike him? No, it is not that. He is always pleasant and good-humoured in his own way; only I cannot bear him to be asked here, and

perhaps made to suppose that I am encouraging him, when the truth is that I do care, with all my heart, for some one else.'

'May I know the name of this happy man, dear Lucy? With all my heart in turn I wish you both joy,' said Anne, tenderly.

She hastily ran over in her own mind Lucy's many admirers, vaguely wondering which the fortunate one might be; for Miss Jennings was reported to be like the sun, in that she showed equal favour to all.

'He is—oh, Anne! there is only one man, near or far, who stands higher than all the rest. Why, there is no one else to be compared with him, at least, so it seems to me; and I have seen many beaux, you know, both at Tunbridge Wells and at Bath. He is' (with pride) '*Dick Saxby*!'

With a quick movement of girlish emotion, pride in her face, and blushes on her cheek, Lucy hid her head on her friend's shoulder. Anne started at the name; then her muscles became rigid.

'You are surprised? Why, I felt you quite jump,' cried Lucy, half pettishly, preparing to draw back and look in Anne's face to see what she thought of the matter.

Anne, with a caressing hand, pressed down the dark curling head once more.

'Only a little surprised, dear child. You would not have me guess your secret beforehand?' she said, in the tone of a kindly elder woman, more than in that of a girl only a few years older than Lucy herself. Then, speaking steadily and clearly though pain stiffened her lips and blanched her face, 'Does Dick know this?'

Lucy laughed; such a happy girlish bubble of sound as it was, like a peal of tiny bells suddenly clanging into music.

‘Does he? My dearest Anne! Do you fancy that I would tell even you otherwise? Why, indeed, he began it all ever since that party which we had here for Hallowe’en, you remember—that time we thought I had left school for good.’

‘Ah, yes. I remember . . . So it was at that party? . . . It all began then?’

‘Yes; but indeed it was always so ever since we were little tiny children. Of course he was bigger than I was and older, you know, and used to take care of me. What is the matter?’

For Anne at the last words suddenly winced. She herself was two years older than Dick, had not been taken care of by him; but treated, on the contrary, as a sister and equal.

‘I pricked myself, I believe. I must have fastened a pin in the bosom of my dress; how careless of me! Pray go on.’

‘Yes, as I was saying,’ went on Lucy, with artless, eager confidence, ‘I believe we felt meant for each other ever since my babyhood; but that night we—well—we found out what love was, you understand.’

‘Quite so. I remember playing to you both at the piano and how quietly you sat and listened to me, little puss, while Dick stood behind.’ Anne’s face was ashy grey, but she spoke calmly and cheerfully. ‘So it began that night, and I have never guessed it all this time. How clever of you both! I had no idea that Dick could have been so close.’

‘Hush, please. Oh, take care.’ Lucy raised herself and listened in a little agony

of alarm that was unaffected. 'Madame might hear us, and above all things she must not know.'

'Why? You don't mean to tell me you are afraid? You ought to speak out openly to your uncle,' counselled Anne, with a fine scorn of taking any but the most straightforward course. 'He cannot disapprove. Dick Saxby is a thorough gentleman and of the oldest family hereabouts.'

'Indeed, Anne, *I cannot*. We dare not yet, either of us. You don't understand the situation. Dick is all you say and more, but he is poor, and Uncle Pierce has so set his heart upon my making what he calls a great match. I am an orphan remember, a mere dependent upon his bounty. All these years he has been very, very kind to me. Even out of affection to him I dare not think of cross-

ing his will just yet, until he has grown accustomed to the idea that I do not wish to accept Richie. Uncle is so eager to see me mistress of Rookhurst. Dick himself owns that perhaps I am right; that we had better wait. Only—only—oh, Anne, I have not seen him for nearly a whole long week, and it seems so hard.'

'For nearly a week! That is a long time indeed;' and Anne smiled slightly cynically, though her tone was kind.

'It seems dreadfully long to us both. Dear, dear Anne, do you not think you can help us just a little?' and Lucy cried and coughed again.

'I am sorry for you, my dear; I am.'

Anne looked at the pretty pathetic figure beside her with a sense of odd compassion. Lucy thought herself so unhappy, and yet was she suffering a hundredth part of the pain that Anne felt

at this very minute, yet dared give no sign? Dick loved Lucy; could the latter be really troubled knowing *that*?

‘How can I help you, child?’

‘Could you not let us meet, only just once or twice,—even once would be so much—at the rectory? We should bless you! Both Dick and I would be so very grateful. You don’t know how fond he is of you; he always tells me he looks on you as a real sister.’

‘I’ll try my best.’ The voice was so hoarse it was hardly recognizable as Anne’s own. She forced a laugh, ‘I declare you have quite given me your cold. You should try some white wine whey to-night.’

Lucy was profuse in broken sentences of gratitude and friendship, with confidences of her own and Dick’s hopes and fears for the future. To these Anne lis-

tened sick at heart yet with a devouring curiosity. Each little revelation was a stab to herself, yet she wished to know all; to recognize how foolish she had been to imagine that when Dick sought her society, reposed in her keeping many a private matter, it had been from any warmer feeling than an almost brotherly friendship. She could not tear herself away—craving to hear, as Lucy wished to tell, ‘all about it.’

At last Madame Dupré returned brisk and smiling, pleased to have escaped duty for a while. She had passed the time in her bed-room with her door locked, gloating over and inspecting a box of French laces. It was a mysterious box that had been left in her room the night before without any address, and the laces were cheap, extraordinarily cheap, considering the custom-house duty upon them in England.

Anne rose as soon as politeness permitted after madame's return, and took leave of her friends.

Poor Anne ! The so lately cheerful young woman was strangely weak when she found herself once more outside in the lane. She felt cold and slightly numbed now ; and she walked unsteadily, for her knees hardly seemed her own.

It was somewhat late now in the afternoon, and the western sky was flooded with crimson like a fiery lake broken by waves of molten heat and light. But Anne's eyes stared dully ahead, seeing no beauty in that glorious colouring, feeling no gladness left for her on earth. Could it make her any happier that the sunset glowed like a furnace, while her feet walked this frost-bound prison in which she was a lonely, lonely human soul ? She was sick in head, utterly sick in heart ; sore discomfited.

Her whole woman's love had been poured out like precious spikenard on the feet of one who saw it not, her heart had been a fire at which he warmed his hands; the intellect and judgment in which she took secret pride both utterly at fault these two years back. So full of pain was she that in her soul arose the cry in which are summed up the heart's longing and bitterness of countless human generations, 'Oh, that I had wings like a dove.'

What use? even far away she would not now be at rest. Then the irony of it! That Lucy, who could take her choice of all the richest, best born, handsomest gentlemen in Kent, should choose the only one among them to whom her uncle would object. What would be the end?

As with lagging steps Anne re-entered the rectory, which she had left so joyously two hours ago, the clamouring voices of

her two youngest little brothers jarred upon her ear. Taking advantage of her absence, they were bolstering each other with cushions in the sitting-room. One cushion had burst, showering the combatants and the carpet with feathers. Anne rated them sharply, feeling greatly irritated, just when she most needed quiet and rest. The school-boys slunk out of the room, all the play gone out of them for full five minutes, thinking sister Nan cross to be so vexed when they meant no harm.

Anne heard them muttering to each other, and was hurt to have scolded them. How patient her mother used to be with the elder ones. She sat down a minute feeling slightly faint, while her eyes rested on the disorderly scene of litter. How different from Lucy's sitting-room at The Laurels, always kept in exquisite neatness, everywhere signs of elegance and refinement brightening it with unexpected

touches. Lucy had hot-house flowers, pretty china, new music and books from town. No such luxuries here ; the rectory carpet was shabby, the rectory furniture somewhat battered. The big Butler boys were rough and many in number ; the Butler purse was slender.

Presently Anne went down on her knees to pick up the scattered feathers, in the midst of which occupation the rector entered the room. There was a whimsical look of apology on his benevolent face.

‘ What are you about, my dear ? I will help you.’ And picking up some feathers the good man absently let them fall again. ‘ I have a confession to make, Mrs. Housekeeper ; indeed, I am shaking in my shoes before your just indignation. *Mea culpa !* I have committed a raid upon your larder and carried off some soup and a small joint of beef.’

‘What, father?’ Anne straightened her back in consternation as she knelt on the floor. ‘That was *all* we had for dinner.’

‘My dear, my dear,’ came in contrite tones from the rector, ‘it is all the dinner an unfortunate family has had for a week. Forgive my zeal, but indeed they were nearly starving. Anything will do for us.’

‘Of course, father never mind I must see if we can manage with a pie to-night.’

Anne strove to appear cheerfully unconcerned, while knowing that now she must bestir herself to go downstairs and make the pastry with her own hands. For it was washing-day, as of course the rector could not be expected to remember, and the cook was up to her arms in soap-suds.

‘And where have you been all afternoon?’ went on good Dr. Butler, seating himself with a weary air, for he had been on

his feet for some hours visiting in the parish.

‘I have been to see Lucy Jennings; she has a heavy cold, and she is unhappy,’ said Anne, abruptly. ‘Her uncle wishes her to accept some one in marriage to whom she has no mind. So much I may tell you, father, without betraying her confidence.’

‘Whew!’ said the rector, softly, ‘that comes of being a beauty. Hey, Anne, you may thank your stars, my child, that your parent will not seek to drive you into making a great match. Now I should never have thought Ratcliffe was mercenary, though he is a hard man. Poor little bird! we must try to comfort Lucy, my dear; she is a tender creature that is not made to bear sorrow.’

Anne bent her head to pick up the last few feathers, suppressing with difficulty a slight cry in her heart,

‘ And I, am *I* then made, any more than she, to endure it ; to suffer unpitied, unloved ? Lucy gets all sympathy, all affection ; it has been the same since she was a baby ; whilst I, I——’

Therewith Anne rose from her knees, took off her bonnet and pelisse, and went downstairs to the kitchen to make the pie. The rector betook himself to his study with a contented feeling that Providence had given him such a good daughter, who for years back had been and still would be, he trusted, his right hand ; who tried so nobly to fill her beloved mother’s place in the household.

CHAPTER XII.

It is easy enough to make generous promises, if one be a person of an impulsive turn in benevolence; but, as all the world knows, it is a different matter to fulfil them, even though one's sensitive conscience keeps pricking.

Hence it was that Anne Butler did not make up her mind for a day or two how to fulfil Lucy Jennings's pleading request. Nevertheless Anne, having once set her hand to the plough, was not a girl to turn back. On the third day she told herself with a sudden access of frenzied impatience that there was no use procrastinating with

her own pain any longer. Best get it over. It was a difficult riddle how she could possibly contrive a secret meeting between Dick and her own rival; but it must be done. She was eager, one might say, to hurt herself, as if more pain would cure that she already felt. She would not spare her own feelings.

‘O, you were a fool; you are blind, vain, and you deserve your punishment,’ she murmured, scornfully, at her own pale grey-eyed reflection, as she put on her bonnet one chill day at the end of January. With a kind of self-rage she resolved to go out and end the business as soon as could be.

The chief point was to make sure of Lucy. So Anne went and delivered an invitation at The Laurels for her friend to spend the afternoon of Candlemas Day at the rectory. Anne’s face was so impas-

sive; her manner cold and slightly awkward, that even madame—sharp as that astute Frenchwoman was—never guessed that the visitor, though with bitter jealousy burning in her heart, was plotting to secure Lucy's happiness. On the contrary, Madame Dupré told herself that there were signs of coolness between the two girls; and it was with no suspicion, but a Frenchwoman's fondness for any diversions to possibly brighten the terrible dullness of the country, that she cried out in mock dismay,

‘ And I, dear Miss, may not I come too? I shall die of le spleen if you leave me all alone. Yes? *merci, merci!* You see, I am not conceited, I am not in love with my own society. Besides, you two demoiselles can chatter together, while I talk to your kind good father. By the way, Lucy, *mon enfant*, you have not been out of doors yet;

still your cold is much better. Yes, I think we can go.'

Anne was forced to accept the inevitable ; but now felt groping in the dark. Then the glimmer of an idea came to her unselfish mind.

The next thing was to invite Romeo, having secured Juliet ; so taking her leave at The Laurels Anne bent her steps towards the Forge Farm. As she went down the miry lane, walking on the edging of damp grass that made a pleasant ride in summer time, with on either side a thick coppice of elm and hazel, she remembered that, the frost having broken up, Dick would most probably be out hunting to-day. At this Anne quickened her tardy steps. For the first time in her life it would be a relief not to meet him. Now some scattered cottages came in sight, making ruddy patches in the wintry landscape with their

weather-stained tiled roofs, projecting upper storeys, and flagged or brick paths leading to the doors.

At one of these, which had been Amos Bird's home, Anne paused surprised. The door was closed; the window shuttered; no smoke curled from the chimney. She went up the path and knocked briskly; but no answer came, and there was no sign of life about the place. Going on to the next cottage about a hundred yards away, the rector's daughter asked after Patty Bird. The good wife answered her enquiries with a curtsy and mysterious whispers. Anne frowned, started in disbelief, and went away deeply grieved and angered. She had been very kind to Patty, whose evil doings seemed like a betrayal of Miss Butler's good opinion; cast a slur, in fact, upon the latter's perception of character.

O, Anne, Anne ! how hard a good woman can be while she is still young, and especially before she has known herself what it is to suffer.

When she arrived at the Saxbys' garden wall, Anne very slowly mounted the deeply worn steps to the arched doorway, and passing through looked up at the picturesque old house with hopeless renunciation. Yes ; how often she had secretly imagined the day when she herself might be a happy mistress here. Away with such dreamings ! If women would only think of facts, plain sober facts, concerning the humdrum round of daily life, and leave sweet fancy alone, how much wiser they would be ; so she lectured herself.

Mrs. Saxby was busy when Anne came in ; she was nearly always busy. From five in summer time, and six or half-past six, at latest, in winter, the former fine

lady and heiress of Rookhurst was now never idle. It was strange that the formerly sentimental girl should have become in middle age so notable a housewife. Now-a-days Catherine saw herself to the weekly churning; cured the bacon; considered her own hand lightest at puddings and pastry; fed the youngest broods of chickens; and had a mistress's eye to all the farm animals, which she herself doctored when they were ill; baking, not to omit her skill in brewing; besides the making of elderberry, raisin, and orange-wine, or ginger cordial. For drying herbs, boiling jam, and darning fine house linen there was not Mrs. Saxby's equal.

‘It is for Dick—and it keeps one's mind from troubling,’ she told herself. Truly it was for Dick that the mother toiled late and early and lived thriftily, that he should find his home all the more com-

fortable. The maids knew when Master Dick came in of an evening muddy and pleasantly tired from farm work, or a day's hunting, that the logs must be burning briskly in the parlour and the hearth spotlessly clean, or the mistress would know the reason why. For Dick the joints were hung to a nicety, juicily cooked; for him was spread a bountiful table; the cloth spotless; beer clear; bread light. And likewise for Dick a little golden hoard of guineas increased month by month in Catherine's secret purse. This was a long, beaded, grandmother's pocket that hung over the arm, worked in a pattern of roses and buds on a white and blue ground, with two gilt rings in the middle. She would not put her savings in the county bank, for what with the many wars on the Continent and Bread Riots and distress at home this good provincial mother, some time a county heiress, mistrusted banks

that might fail at some unexpected moment, like any peasant woman.

Also Mrs. Saxby busied herself in order not to think. By thinking she meant brooding over her own troubled life and wasted fortune.

It was vain and even hurtful to muse on what might have been; to imagine her own son and heir master at Rookhurst, if things had gone as they ought in days past. Her handsome Dick should have been rich now, lord of the manor; Justice of the Peace; possibly M.F.H.; the colonel of the yeomanry, for that had generally gone in the Saxby family, even—why not?—member of Parliament.

‘ When I go musing all alone,
Thinking of divers things fore-known,
When I build castles in the air,
Void of sorrow and void of fear,
Pleasing myself with phantasms sweet,
Methinks the time runs very fleet,
All my joys to this are folly,
None so sweet as melancholy.’

This afternoon, not to keep her visitor standing in a small still-room, on stone flags, Catherine deserted the ordering of her pickle-jars, and, with a hearty kiss, led Anne into the old-fashioned but pleasant sitting-room. They did not go up on the daïs; that was the summer parlour, but it being cold weather they two sat down in the opposite chimney-seats of the wide fire-place.

Anne, feeling nervous as to her real errand, began at once to tell her elder friend anxiously the ill news of Patty Bird.

‘The neighbours say that the girl was in trouble, yet we have all had such a good opinion of her,’ ended the narrator. ‘Last night it seems she must have made a moonlight flitting, and has left no trace. The cottage was found deserted this morning; the door standing open. Only she

has taken her clothes away with her, and they think some money. I wonder where she is gone?’

‘Gone to London, no doubt. Its wicked lights draw all the poor silly country moths to destruction.’

‘My father will be greatly vexed. He will blame himself for this missing sheep from the fold. He will say he has been a bad shepherd,’ sighed Anne.

And both women wondered and discussed the matter at some length, but remained mystified, giving it up as an unsolved riddle. Catherine changed the subject.

‘By the way, child, I should like your opinion about some finery that I am making as a present for my boy, Dick. Look, dear, these are patterns for under waistcoats. Now do you think that this turquoise shade, or that deep crimson, would

suit his fair complexion best? You know his new blue coat—indeed he has only one now; one a year, poor fellow, while his cousin Richie, I suppose, has dozens,’ bravely suppressing a sigh.

Anne gave the matter her entire attention, and decided for the turquoise blue.

‘I thought so myself. Yes; he is as fair as any girl, you know, although such a strong man,’ smiled the mother. ‘Well, dear, shall we go on talking? You don’t mind my hemming some shirt-frills to lose no time, do you? They are for Dick, you see.’

‘Of course not, Mrs. Saxby; but what lovely Mechlin lace you are sewing upon them. Why, it is like a cobweb.’

‘Yes, it is very delicate. I wore it on a tucker at my own wedding. But there! I want no such vanities now. It is the turn of you young people.’

‘As we are talking of Dick,’ began Anne, timidly (as if when they two were together these women ever discussed any other subject with such zest as that of the young lord and master of the farm), ‘has it ever struck you, dear Mrs. Saxby, that he might have a secret liking—an attachment, I might say—for some one?’

Catherine’s flying needle stopped. She looked up at her visitor in secret concern.

‘As to that, Anne, he has never told me so in many words: but still a mother cannot be blind, and I have guessed something. Only, my dear, I fear, that is to say, I know, it is not the person—whom you may have thought—that is fancied—’

‘I mean Lucy Jennings,’ came quietly from Anne’s lips.

‘What! you do know!’ The trouble cleared instantly from Mrs. Saxby’s face; she was vastly relieved. ‘Excuse me, my

dear, I did not guess you were in the secret. I meant, well—Lady Althea. You see, Dick always says he thinks her such a monstrous fine girl.’

Now this was an utter fib. In very truth, Catherine was terribly afraid for a moment that Anne might suppose herself Dick’s chosen love; and, being greatly attached to the girl, was sorely dismayed.

Anne, therefore, now explained the matter (having obtained a vague permission to let Mrs. Saxby ‘know a little’), and she told how Lucy had opened her troubled heart to her friend.

Perhaps Catherine Saxby was inclined to be faintly resentful that her visitor should be better informed than herself in what so closely concerned her beloved Dick. Nevertheless, she was deeply inquisitive, intensely interested, and dropped

her work unconsciously to listen, with her big eyes fixed across the hearth-glow on Anne's face. When the mother heard what Anne had to say, she unbosomed herself, delighted at last to have a female kindred spirit with whom she could talk over this matter.

First, she had foreseen it all this many a day. Why! as a ten-year-old school-boy Dick used to confide to her his admiration of the little girl for whom he saved up all his pennies to buy candy and valentines.

'Well, certainly, Lucy is surprisingly pretty, and of the sweetest disposition. You and she have always been like two daughters to me. Ah, Anne,' she ended, half pleased yet regretful, 'I had thought at one time it might have been *you*. Well, they say all is for the best. Lucy will make a lovely bride, but as for making

a good farmer's wife—there, my dear, you would have excelled her.'

Anne gravely smiled ; for the life of her she could not conjure up brightness into her face.

'I am vastly obliged for your kind opinion, dear madam ; but you see your good wishes have been thrown away upon me.'

In her heart the girl was furious with her elder friend.

'How stupid !' she cried in her heart, with rising passion, while Catherine was placidly building up some fallen logs on the hearth. 'Why, this simple soul actually believes I ought to be delighted with her compliment. If not the chosen one, to be next best in Mr. Dick's estimation is the highest honour in the world for me, forsooth.' At that moment Anne almost felt as if she hated Dick ; she did

not hate Mrs. Saxby, but felt coldly that the latter was a foolish woman, blinded by adoration of her only son.

Threading her needle again by the waning light which came through the small ingle window, Mrs. Saxby remembered with secret satisfaction that after all Dick had chosen his sweetheart for the best. He would need his old mother still if Lucy could not knit his stockings to his liking, nor mix his negus hot and nice, with as skilful a blending of the ingredients as herself. Now Anne, sitting there on the other side of the hearth, was such a capable, energetic housewife, that her mother-in-law would most likely be obliged to give up the reins of domestic management into the younger woman's hands.

CHAPTER XIII.

FOR some minutes Mrs. Saxby and her visitor remained in total silence without perceiving it, engrossed by their separate thoughts; the one in selfish rejoicing, the other in selfish pain, so desperately deceitful is the human heart. And yet both women sincerely loved each other; each believed she had the other's best wishes.

A clatter of horse's hoofs in the paved farmyard roused them both. Catherine looked out through the wide low window at the further end of the room.

'It is Dick,' she said. 'Does he not look well in his pink coat, Anne? Why—you are not going yet?'

‘I fear I must, dear Mrs. Saxby; I have stayed so long already. My father will be waiting——’

But, before Anne could hurry off, Dick stood in the doorway, looking like a young sun-god; his smiles were so radiant, his manly presence seemed so to light up the room with human warmth and cheerfulness. Truly enough his mother had a right to be proud of him; for his hunting-coat, top-boots, and breeches set off his large-limbed, well-knit figure to the greatest advantage. Dick was a fine young fellow in ordinary farm clothes, but when dressed in his best he was splendid, when many others looked barbers’ blocks or tailors’ dummies. No amount of gaudy under waistcoats, fine frills, high stocks, or the most curly-brimmed of beaver hats ever made him seem that generally odious creature—a countrified buck. Dick Saxby

looked a gentleman, every inch of him, as Anne felt now when her eyes rested on his bright face.

‘ Indeed, you must stay, my dear child. I have to go to the kitchen for a minute, now that my son has come back. Why should you want to leave us yet? I thought you wished to see Dick, and you can keep him company.’

This was true enough ; for what other purpose had Anne come to call ? It was too ridiculous, she knew, to run away in order to miss the very object of her visit.

‘ And how are *you* ? I am very glad to see you, Anne !’

Dick’s blue eyes looked with so pleasant a glance in Anne’s face, his hand grasped hers with such affectionate warmth as he led her back to the fireside, that for a moment, only a moment, she almost turned faithless to Lucy. Could the latter have

made a mistake after all—her pretty head being so turned with universal admiration that she included Dick wrongly among her adorers? Surely he cared——

Then Anne closed her ears to the tempter's voice, and said, in a curiously formal, precise tone,

‘By the way, I have been to see Lucy Jennings, Dick. You asked me to do so the other day and I went.’

‘Ha!’ Dick started, his face became expectant. ‘How good of you! But you are always good, dear Anne,’ he cried. ‘And how did she seem; and what did she say? How was she looking?’

Then he stopped, fearing to have betrayed too much.

‘She is nearly well by now. I have seen her twice and she has told me a great deal, Dick; more than ever *you* did. She,’ (Anne’s voice faltered slightly) ‘she has

told me everything about you and herself.'

'No! Has she?' Dick looked sheepishly pleased. 'Well, I am awfully glad of it. She has wanted a friend so badly, poor little dear. Don't think it unkind of me not telling you myself. You see, it was such a secret matter, I could not. You understand that, Anne, don't you? Unless Lucy wished it, I could say nothing. But I am very pleased.'

'Then you are really engaged, Dick?'

'Yes; really engaged since two years. Before that I gave Lucy a rush ring when I was seven years old, and we broke a lucky sixpence together when I was ten.'

At which Dick gave a great glad laugh that filled the low ceilinged room with happy sound.

It did Anne good to hear him. Her heart had fallen lower and lower at each of the

sentences confirming what Lucy had said. She was conscious of a great aching void. But at the sight and sound of Dick's happiness she forgot herself for a while, as she watched his face.

Then he said quietly, as if hushed at the thought of so much happiness,

‘Yes. Lucy has promised to be my wife.’

His whole face became lighted up; it looked glorified.

This was almost too much to see and bear. Anne stirred the mound of white wood ashes with her foot, and stared at the smouldering sparks revealed.

‘Lucy has asked me to help you and herself, Dick, so far as it lies in my power. She says that you can seldom or never see each other now. Will you come to the rectory, if I can arrange a meeting there between you?’

‘Will I? Bless you, darling!’ And

with a shout of rapture Dick seized Anne round the waist and kissed her.

Anne turned as white as snow ; she felt almost as cold. There was not the faintest answering warmth in her manner or lips, as she drew herself gently away.

‘ Don’t, Dick,’ she murmured.

‘ Why ? I beg your pardon. I do indeed. But I didn’t think you would mind me, Anne. I am so glad ; so heartily obliged ; and we are such old friends. Besides, what’s a kiss ?’ (What indeed ? so much, so little, according as the giver or taker regards it.)

With a slight gulp Anne continued,

‘ Will you come on Candlemas afternoon ? Could you be at the church, do you think, about five o’clock ?’

Dick gave a comical groan.

‘ Candlemas Day ! And we have such

a good meet at Badger's Hill. It is Tuesday next. There is generally a real grand run from there, and we may finish up goodness knows how many miles away. What a pity! Could you not contrive to change the day, Anne dear?'

'You are a pretty lover indeed, sir!' and Anne tossed her head. 'Why, I have had the greatest trouble and thought even to manage this much for you. Don't you see—there must be some pretext for Lucy to come and see the church with me, and it will be lit up on Candlemas afternoon as usual. You cannot meet her at the rectory; Madame Dupré never leaves her side an instant. But there! if you prefer your day's hunting to your lady-love——'

'No, no, no! of course I do not. Don't go and tell Lucy that, please, Anne; it would be unkind of you. I only thought

for a moment we could have combined both. Of course I am coming. Five o'clock did you say ?'

So they hastily arranged the matter between them. Then, when Catherine returned, after seeing to the ordering of creature comforts for the household lord, Anne again attempted to take her leave.

'Pray don't go yet. Wait till I have changed my clothes, and I will see you home,' urged Dick, enjoining upon his mother, as he hastened upstairs, to detain the guest meanwhile.

Instantly Anne resolved to make her escape.

'Indeed, Mrs. Saxby, I am not afraid of a walk in the dark. It is quite safe in the lane. Dick must be tired ; indeed he must ; and you would like to have him to yourself for a little chat, I know.'

Catherine disclaimed this last feebly,

though Anne's suggestions plainly carried weight. So, with a hasty leave-taking, the girl slipped out of doors into the darkness, for the winter evening had now closed in.

It had begun to rain a short time before, and every minute the drops came down more sharply, stinging Anne's face. She could not see to pick her steps presently, where the hedge grew high on either side, and, with her head bent to the chill, driving sleet, the lonely girl plodded homeward, feeling very wretched. In a manner, this walk seemed an omen of her own future life. Out alone in the night and cold and wet; no friendly voice to cheer her; no strong companion by her side on whose arm she could lean.

About half-way between the Forge Farm and the rectory, where the road was most gloomy and solitary, Anne became aware of footsteps softly following. Then a squat

man's figure, as she dimly descried it, shambled alongside of her, and began importuning for money in a whining voice.

‘It is a wet night, marm. Won’t you give a poor man a shilling to get him a lodging? I’ve not broke my fast since yesterday morning. It’s gospel truth I’m telling yer; and I’ve got two little boys waiting for me in the village back there, and I don’t know where to get them food, s’elp me.’

‘Hold your tongue, Weasel Joey. I know your voice well enough. You have got no little boys, unless you have stolen them,’ declared Anne, stoutly. ‘My father tried to get you to do some honest work last hop-picking, and he has often helped you before; but it is of no use. I have got nothing for you.’

‘I ax pardon, Miss Butler. I do indeed,

marm.' Weasel Joey still kept up a trot beside the expected benefactress, but changed his whine to a tone of injured remonstrance. 'They're my sister's children, Miss Butler; so they are. If you come back, marm, to the village, you'll see them a half-mile on the far side of it sitting under a haystack waiting for me. It is all the shelter we're likely to get. And as to the rector getting me work, he was very hard upon me, miss; so he was. But you're a lady, and have a kind heart; and if a man has a bad *charakter* given him, it is hard to get any to believe in him. Come now, miss, you've got a shilling in your purse, I'll be bound.'

Joey by now had got in front of his prey, and kept moving to this side and that as she tried to slip past him.

'Will you get out of my way?' Anne was highly incensed, all the more that she

was aware of some lurking fears which she strove to fight down.

‘I’ll go, lady, when you give me that half-crown.’

The Weasel came nearer and nearer. Anne did not like to push him off, but was afraid every minute he would seize her arm.

‘Stand aside, I tell you. If you don’t, I shall go back to Forge Farm and get some one to come with me.’

This was tantamount to an avowal of cowardice, and Joey treated it accordingly.

‘Get some one to come with you? And what for? That is as much as to injure a poor man’s character; so it is. And you’ve got to make it good to me. I haven’t done nothing to you; I haven’t. Not laid a finger on you.’

Here Joey came nearer and hissed his words uncomfortably in Anne’s ear. She

attempted to evade him, but he was too quick, and barred the way.

‘ Look ’ee here, miss, it’s no good. You’d better give up your purse without any noise, for after being insulted like this I’ll have it, if I have to take it.’

Anne gave a loud cry for help that rang far through the silence of the night. Next instant Weasel caught hold of her, trying to get at her pocket, while she struggled fiercely to tear off his hands. Anne was a strong and tall young woman, as has been said; still, hampered as she was by her pelisse and her ladylike feelings, she must have come ill off in a scuffle with the Weasel, who, although old and undersized, was a tough adversary. He caught hold of Anne’s boa, and began twisting it artfully over her mouth, so as to stop the girl’s screams, in spite of her efforts to free herself from being half-strangled. Just as

the victim felt her breath going, and while she and Weasel Joey were struggling in the middle of the lane, there came a man's shout in the distance ; followed by a fresh halloo and the tramp of running footsteps.

Anne's heart bounded at the glad sound of deliverance. The Weasel paused listening, with his hand at the back of her neck, before giving the boa an extra twist. Then he whistled in a peculiar sharp way ; two quick notes. The whistle was answered in somewhat like manner as the runner came near in the gloom.

‘ Is that you—Staymaker ? ’

Anne was thrilled ; for she knew that this nickname was whispered as being that of the chief of the smugglers' gang in the Weald. She felt instinctively that Weasel Joey stood at tension, ready to spring aside or to welcome an accomplice. That answering whistle had reassured the rascal

and made Anne give herself up for lost.

Tramp, tramp; pant, pant. Two more seconds, and a dark figure ran down upon them.

‘Not “Staymaker.” It is I, you villain. Take that,’ thundered Dick Saxby’s voice in the darkness.

He aimed a blow before the Weasel could dart out of reach, that caught the rascal on one side of the head, and sent him spinning into the ditch. Dick would have followed this up, but was afraid that Anne had been garrotted. She leaned against him feeling faint, and there was just glimmer enough of light for him to see how her mufflings had been drawn tight over her mouth. Dick supported her with his strong arms; freed, soothed her. But even as Anne still rested upon him in weakness a voice hissed from the further side of the hedge through which Weasel

Joey had escaped, by a gap that seemed only large enough for the passage of a dog under the close-growing blackthorn branches.

In tones not unlike the venomous spitting of a cat he jeered,

‘ You’re Mr. Dick Saxby, are you ? I’ll be even with you yet. So you’re keeping company with parson’s girl ; you that meet old Ratcliffe’s niece on the sly as well. You’re a nice gentleman, you are. Who was it -brought Patty Bird to grief ? Yah !’

‘ Hold your tongue, you skulking cur ; or I’ll break every bone in your wretched carcass.’

‘ Will you indeed ?’ came in parting jeering tones from the further field. ‘ Best reckon with Jim Lee first, for he says he’ll have your life for disgracing his sweetheart.’ The last words were shouted al-

most out of hearing; the Weasel was escaping rapidly into the night.

Dick felt Anne start with surprise and dismay and draw away from him. He held her firmly; his chest swelling with furious indignation.

‘What, Anne! Surely you don’t believe a syllable which that wretch has been saying? I swear to you there is not a grain of truth in it. Upon my life I am entirely innocent. Come, Anne; you have known me so many years, can you not believe me?’

‘I do, Dick. Of course I do. I would believe your word against the world. But what has put such a thought into anyone’s mind?’

‘The devil, I suppose,’ said Dick, gloomily, proceeding to walk onwards with Anne down the lane; ‘for how else such an idea can have got into the brains of any block-head passes my comprehension.’

He saw Anne safely home to the rectory door, and with a hearty shake of the hand they two parted good friends.

‘Nothing more,’ said Anne to herself, as feeling shaken in spirit as well as in body she went slowly upstairs, anxious to hide her misadventure from her father, who would be greatly distressed by it.

Even while going to Forge Farm that day, a last hope had lingered almost secretly in her own mind that Lucy might have exaggerated matters—that the engagement with Dick was not final.

‘I renounce him now, and for ever!’ This was Anne Butler’s solemn declaration, standing still with her bonnet-strings half untied. ‘And I will now and always be true and loyal in word and deed to them both, so far as in me lies.’

Whereupon she slowly took off her bonnet.

CHAPTER XIV.

ON Candlemas Day the old custom of lighting up the church with candles had never been allowed to fall into disuse at Rookhurst; and it was upon this time-honoured ceremony that Anne now counted for arranging a meeting between Dick and Lucy, as has been said.

The two ladies from The Laurels came over early, for Anne had begged her friend Lucy to spend a long evening. About half-past four, or a little sooner, therefore, the chaperon and her ward arrived; carrying large work-bags on their arms so as to be prepared for embroidery and gossip.

The good rector was awaiting them, having been secretly instigated by Anne to make himself agreeable to Madame Dupré.

‘Could you not carry her off to your study, father? Show her your collection of old coins, dear; and there are the flint implements that you have picked up in the neighbourhood from time to time; and—O, pray, sir, keep her diverted, I beg, for an hour or so. You will be doing Lucy a real service.’

‘But, my dear Anne,’ Dr. Butler passed his hand, in amused doubt, over his broadly benignant brow, and the thick hair that he wore tied in the old fashion, ‘what is the meaning of this secrecy? You know, my child, that I have a great dislike to all plots; even those small innocent intrigues which some of your sex adore. They may be harmless; but I warn you, my child, that I like to be quite straightforward in my actions.

The least conspiracy would make me feel so guilty that I should betray the whole matter by my behaviour.'

'Of that I am certain,' smiled Anne; looking up admiringly in the good man's visage and thinking to herself that it wore such a look as must that of Moses; for Dr. Butler's face seemed irradiated with an inner light of holiness. Serene, loving to all men, save a very few whom he scorned as reptiles; beloved by all, far and near; excepting those who dreaded the heel he would set firmly upon their necks, Dr. Butler ought not to be asked to do aught that were in the least deceitful.

'Lucy and I are great friends as you know, sir; and she has much to tell me. All girls, like ourselves, love to chat together without being listened to by their elders. Now Madame Dupré never leaves Lucy's side unless the lady is flattered by

your attentions, which, I believe, she really appreciates highly.'

This was true ; for madame's coquetry was so great that she truly believed the rector admired herself, and was pleased to set her cap at him when Ratcliffe and others were out of the way.

Smiling at his daughter's flattering argument, the rector consented to invite Madame Dupré to spend an hour in his study. So with great pleasure to himself he showed off his various collections of curiosities, while madame admired, pretended to be much interested, and upon the whole enjoyed herself.

Contented with the success of her artifice, Anne now hastily whispered the plan to Lucy whose heart had been beating for days past with expectation of some such help. Putting on their bonnets and furtive tippets the two girls sallied out, linked

arm-in-arm with the ostensible object of seeing the church lighted up which stood open all that Candlemas afternoon until six o'clock.

Opening the wicket-gate at the further side of the rectory lawn they crossed the graveyard, where the tombstones stood up like ghosts, but no living being save themselves was to be descried in the gathering darkness. They had hardly entered the church, however, when a firm step came ringing down the side aisle from the Saxby chapel. It was Dick himself in strange attire, considering the sacred edifice where they stood ; for he wore his pink hunting-coat and buckskin breeches that were splashed with mud. As he rightly prophesied, the hounds both met and found at Badger's Hill that day, and they had twice enjoyed an excellent run.

‘Excuse my costume,’ said Dick, com-

ing forward and shaking hands with Anne first, although she would have drawn back, glancing at Lucy. ‘The fact is I stopped half-way, or three-quarters that is to say, this afternoon when we had found our second fox and were having a very good time of it. Forgive me, Lucy, for not coming away earlier and changing my coat. Nothing less than the chance of meeting you would have made me turn Bay Ronald’s head homewards this day. He could not understand what I was driving at when I rattled him across country, taking the fences when there was not a hound within sight or hearing. But there——’

Dick by this time was holding Lucy’s little hand that was soft as satin and white as milk, in his own strong clasp; and the pretty creature was looking up at him with such a world of gladness shining in

her dark eyes and sweet pale face, which had hardly yet recovered its usual exquisite bloom, that her lover broke off unconsciously.

He drew a long breath, and so great a love-light illumined his own features as he stood brave and strong above her—looking down at his darling, his little sweetheart, who for two years had kept so true to himself, regardless of attentions from the richest gentlemen and even noblemen far and near—that he could not utter another word. Both standing there in an ecstasy of rapture at meeting again had forgotten Anne's presence. They were both pale before, but now the blood rushed warm to their cheeks, as blue eyes and black gazed into each other's depths.

Anne drew back hastily, yet watched them still, fascinated for a moment or two. The love-look on their faces scorch-

ed her, so to speak, like white heat. Then she shivered from head to foot, her own vitality ebbing from her.

‘I will go away,’ she said, in a thick voice that hardly seemed her own, as she moved to the threshold of the porch. ‘I shall watch out here to see that no one surprises you. You will be quite safe.’

Neither of the lovers heeded her. Indeed, her last words were spoken too huskily to be noticed.

Anne stood in the porch, trembling yet with inward emotion. She strained her hearing listening both ways : to the murmurs that stole rapturously from inside where those two stood just out of sight behind the font. Her ears caught also, but less keenly, what more accustomed sounds came through the darkness without. There was a horse stamping impatiently and snorting at moments ; then

consoling himself, it seemed, by cropping the grass. It was Bay Ronald that Dick had tied up by the further wicket through which a path led to the door of the Saxby chapel. Mingled with the horse's fitful grazing were distant noises from the village, the tramp and hum of voices from some belated labourers coming home after work upon outlying farms.

But through all this Anne never heard a cautious footstep brushing the grass. She did not see a man's figure hiding among the tombstones, creeping noiselessly forward wherever there lay thickest shadow.

The wicket-gate near Bay Ronald had clicked two minutes ago ; the latter had whinnied, but Anne was not come out into the porch just then. Now she stood, her figure thrown into relief by the strong light behind from the illuminated church,

and stared with blank gaze at the dark outline of the rectory.

The man crept nearer; nearer. Soon he was behind the next tombstone, scarcely five yards away.

Anne wrung her hands together; ground her foot hard; clenched her teeth. Then, this paroxysm subsiding, she moved and crouched down on the stone seat within the porch, bending her head almost to her knees. The watcher outside hesitated a second or two, then leaving his hiding-place advanced on tiptoe, with catlike footfall, in spite of his hessian boots.

Pierce Ratcliffe, for it was he, had learned long ago what it was to trust his life at times to the stealthiness of his movements and the keenness of his ears and sight.

It astonished him to see Anne waiting in the porch, for now only he recognized

her. Till a few seconds back he had mistaken the watching figure for that of his niece Lucy, therefore delayed his approach till the lover, who was doubtless near, should have joined her at the tryst.

Ratcliffe's own presence was easily explained. Unknown to Dick, who was sailing away in the first flight after the hounds, at the beginning of the second run that day, the captain received a severe fall. It was at such a small fence, too, that his wise old hunter disdained to jump it, so scrambled over like a donkey. Somehow, the bank being rotten gave way, and horse and rider came down, to their mutual astonishment. It was nothing of a fall; but, on struggling up, the usually sagacious animal placed one forefoot by accident on his master's neck near the shoulder. A little more, and it might have been a fatal mischance; as it was, Ratcliffe felt

dizzy in his head and strangely sick for a few minutes.

As none of the field imagined Rat could have been hurt by such a trifling upset, hardly anyone looked round. But it was some time before the fallen man recovered himself sufficiently to be helped on his horse by a labourer who caught it for him. Very slowly he rode homeward, feeling that he had been nearer death than ever before in his life.

‘Why, what is the matter, captain?’ called out Bill Butler, as, passing on the road near The Laurels, he saw by the rider’s bent attitude and desponding face that something was amiss.

‘I have had a spill, my boy ; that’s all. But it has made me feel shaken and out of spirits,’ Ratcliffe strove cheerily to reply.

‘What ! and you are alone, too, this evening ! Your ladies have just gone to

the rectory. Come up and have a bit of dinner with us, too, Captain Rat; my father and Anne will be glad to see you, I know. I wish I had had the chance of a spill myself to-day; but the dear old dad cannot afford to let us have more than one hunter between us.' And with a regretful grin Bill betook himself off, nothing doubting but that sister Anne would cordially endorse his invitation.

So Ratcliffe, after changing his coat, started slowly on foot by the field path to the rectory, his legs shaking somewhat under him, and his heart unusually softened, even weak.

'A near thing; a very near thing,' he murmured to himself, standing still and leaning on his stick. Then he glanced back at the light burning over his own doorway at The Laurels, while next his eyes followed the dark sweep of the Rook-

hurst woods. ‘Well; it would not matter much for myself, if only my Lucy were properly provided for first. A fine scrimmage there would be if I were carried home dead, and the wolves came down on the fold. She might be left next door to penniless, what with all these cursed debts, and business going so badly, too, since the Peace. Ever since the Battle of Leipzig my fortune, like Boney’s, has been] going downhill at a terrific pace. And if that happened, Richie Saxby, over yonder, would cry off in a jiffey, curse him ! There is Suzanne, too ; but she is well able to take care of herself.’ So, coming slowly up to the wicket-gate, Ratcliffe’s attention was suddenly aroused by the sight of Bay Ronald tied close by to the paling.

‘Whew ! what does this mean ?’ and he softly approached the animal, to make sure that his eyes did not deceive him in the twilight.

Bay Ronald put back his ears and promptly lashed out, having a hearty dislike to strangers.

‘It is you, my friend. I thought so.’
And Ratcliffe retreated out of danger.
‘Now, what does this mean?’

He did not take long to make up his mind.

And so now, pressing close to the pillar at one side of the porch, his keen face softly advanced, peered round.

Anne had forgotten her post of sentinel; she was rocking herself slowly to and fro with her teeth set as if in inward pain. The eavesdropper’s features took on a curious expression of mingled surprise, suspicion, and perplexed compassion.

‘It is she, by gad! What can have happened? Has Dick been trifling—it cannot be,’ darted through his mind.

Anne was a great favourite with Ratcliffe, for he heartily respected the girl’s frank

honesty, having known her since childhood, and vastly admired her figure as she grew into the noble proportions of her womanhood.

Suddenly Anne spoke aloud, whispering to herself unconsciously in her pain,

‘ My God, how shall I bear it? how shall I bear it?’

A step sounded close by; a pitying voice said, very gravely and kindly,

‘ Miss Butler, Anne, you seem in trouble, my dear. May not an old friend offer you his sympathy, if not his services?’

Anne sprang to her feet, shame dyeing her cheeks; her eyes wide and scared.

‘ You here, Captain Ratcliffe? Why, how— What brings you, may I ask?’

‘ Your brother has asked me to dine to-night. I hope it will not be an intrusion?’

‘ O, no, sir, surely not. What? you, such an old friend! We shall be very glad

indeed ;' and offering to take his arm Anne moved hastily forward, as anxious as a fluttering lapwing near its nest to draw him away from the spot.

But Ratcliffe was not to be so easily gulled. He sharply divined her object.

' May I not see the church first? It is lit up, I perceive, for Candlemas.'

' No, no, pray,' Anne tried to move between him and the door, and affected a careless laugh. ' The candles are almost burnt down ; the spectacle is over ; there is nothing there worth seeing, I assure you. Besides, the sexton will be coming immediately to lock the door.'

' But there may be *some one* there.' Ratcliffe noticed that while he spoke low at first, Anne herself raised her voice, as if wishing to be overheard. A sudden light broke in upon him. ' Excuse me,' he sternly said. Whereupon pushing past

the girl, in spite of her attempt to catch his arm, he stood next minute in front of the surprised lovers.

‘Heyday!’ Ratcliffe gave a low whistle and stood gazing at the blushing pair with a terrible silence that was worse than words. After a few seconds he spoke, though hardly above a whisper, ‘So! young sir; so, Miss Lucy. What does this mean?’

Dick was caught while standing with Lucy in his arms as she looked up in his face. The young lovers instantly loosed their embrace on Ratcliffe’s appearance; and Lucy would have also slipped aside in confusion, but that Dick caught her hand and held it fast to give her confidence. As they stood embarrassed and tongue-tied, Anne threw herself between the pair and Lucy’s stern guardian.

‘Dear Captain Ratcliffe, do not look so angry, I beseech you. It is all my fault,

mine. Blame me! I arranged this meeting; it was my device; I invited them both to come.'

'Yours! you are helping in this matter, Miss Anne! Do you mean to tell me that you wished this young man and my niece to meet as lovers?'

'I did. They confided their attachment to me. You surprised me on the watch.'

Ratcliffe backed two steps, and slowly, with a deeply courteous air, took off his hat, looking hard at Anne the while.

'This is a sacred place, so I must be reverent,' said he, very quietly. 'Madam, you women and your ways are indeed wonderful.'

Poor Anne trembled and looked aside, shame-stricken. She knew that Captain Ratcliffe understood her, though she also guessed that her secret would be safe in his keeping; for she believed him to be an up-

right and even chivalrous officer. Still—still—she had betrayed her heart.

‘Sir,’ said Dick—it was the first moment when he could get in a word, so eager was Anne in defence—and the young fellow spoke manfully, while the deep blush of startled resentment faded from his honest, handsome face. ‘It is true that Lucy and I do love each other. We have grown up doing so all our lives; only now, for my own part, I care for her a hundred, no, a thousand times more than ever. Do not blame us, captain, you have always been such a kind friend to me—as good as a father to her.’

‘Indeed, indeed, yes! You have been the best of fathers,’ cried Lucy, her tender heart touched by Dick’s words, and with an impulse of affectionate gratitude and impassioned entreaty, the pretty creature dropped upon her knees. ‘Dear, dear

uncle, pray forgive us !. Indeed I cannot help loving Dick with all my heart. And he would have told you long ago, he wanted to do so, only that I begged him to wait.'

'Long ago ! So this has been kept hidden from me ?'

'Please do not be vexed, Uncle Pierce !' and Lucy's arms embraced Ratcliffe's knees, while, with her head thrown back, her eyes gazed coaxingly, tearfully, smilingly, all three at the same time, in her guardian's grim, weather-beaten visage. 'Remember you are like my father indeed. So I beseech you, as I might my own dead one, who I have heard was so kindly and generous, to forgive me—for his sake, if not for mine.'

'Leave his name out of the question, child.'

Ratcliffe, who had started at Lucy's

mention of her father, turned his head aside from the exquisite, almost irresistible witchery of the beautiful vision at his feet.

His reddish eyebrows met in a troubled frown; his stern lips twitched once or even twice as he stood with arms folded on his breast and bent head. No doubt the accident that day had greatly shaken the old seaman's usually iron nerve; nearness to death must have altered his view point. Otherwise surely Rat would not have been so deeply stirred by old memories crowding thick and fast; by the remembrance of a man's handsome face, with dark eyes and curling black hair; looking trustfully in his own; a face as like Lucy's as that of father could be to daughter.

God! he felt as if stabbed while the girl knelt there, pressing her warm lips on his rough hands, between broken utterances of

her praises and filial affection ; melting his hardened heart by the title of father which it is human instinct for all men to crave hearing. Such a turmoil of conflicting thoughts rose in the man's secret soul that he stood silent seeming to listen to Dick, who suddenly waxed eloquent. Yet not a word perhaps reached the captain's understanding.

Honest Dick believed he was making a good impression ; and his heart being full his lips spoke excellently. He reasoned ; pleaded ; urged his suit by every claim of old friendship and young ardent love. Anne was so stirred by his burning words that she burst out crying and dropped down on her knees beside Lucy, the two girls embracing with sobs, their arms twined round each other.

Ratcliffe was really touched. The ' old turn-coat,' as he was not called without

reason, passed the back of his hand over his eyes, not without cause.

‘Don’t, don’t,’ he muttered. ‘Gad, I can’t stand this! Upon my soul I can’t!’ and he pulled out his red silk bandana, and blew his nose with a trembling hand.

At that moment Dick actually pitied Captain Ratcliffe, his old friend looked so miserable. Dick had never seemed to notice before how aged Rat was and how grey.

Taking a tone of gentle reasonableness, the young man affectionately laid his hand on his elder’s shoulder.

‘Come now, captain, you are like yourself again: the best and kindest friend that ever was. Now tell me, as man to man, what objection have you against me?’

‘You have not enough cash, my lad. That’s it; that’s the whole mischief. Demme! but for that I like your spirit.’

‘Thank you, sir. And if I were rich, or at least a good deal better off than I am, would you accept me as a husband for Lucy?’

‘My poor boy, I would indeed; I give you my word, Dick. I have lost money lately, what with the Peace being declared, and rises and changes that no man could foresee in the money-market. There, there! my children, I will not be unkind; but neither of you knows, no one does, of my private troubles lately Well, let us say no more about this affair now. Give me time; I must think it over. An old man cannot be quite so rash as you young folk. Shake hands, Dick. And you, Lucy, my dearest child, say good-bye for the present.’

So ending, and offering his arm to Anne to conduct her back to the rectory, Captain Ratcliffe cleverly broke up the meeting.

The lovers separated with one or two backward glances, in which gleams of joy and hope were mutually discernible and cheering. Anne, too, was upborne by a satisfied sense that she had mainly contributed to bring about the present state of affairs.

CHAPTER XV.

LATER on, there followed a quiet dinner at the rectory.

Dr. Butler himself put forth all his agreeableness in conversation; Bill tried to be jocose; and Madame Dupré was uneasily vivacious while stealing disturbed glances at Ratcliffe's gloomy face. Nevertheless, Anne and Lucy were noticeably subdued, though from slightly different causes, and their reserve affected the others sensibly. Anne felt as if she had burnt her ships behind her in a quixotic attempt to play go-between. Lucy's gentle mind was still agitated by the recent thunder-

storm, which had nevertheless cleared the air. Yes, she was almost relieved that now her uncle knew the secret which her conscience had often reproached her for keeping from this beloved guardian.

In the very middle of dinner came a sudden interruption. A maid rushed into the room, eager to tell an exciting piece of ill news.

‘ Oh, master, there’s a man just been brought into the yard who is dying. He has been found in the lane. His head is all bloody, and he’s insensible, the men say.’

Upon this the rector hastily rose, begging his guests to excuse him, and bidding Anne go on carving.

‘ Who is the fellow ? What’s the matter ? ’ Ratcliffe tried to ask coolly, as he was in the act of pouring out some wine ; but his hand shook in an unusual fashion,

and the claret was spilled on the tablecloth.

‘ Please, captain, they say it’s—not that I saw him myself—’ gasped the breathless maiden, holding her panting side and lowering her voice to a dramatic whisper, ‘ but they do say it’s Jim Lee ; him that used to be your old groom, sir.’

Ratcliffe leant back in his chair, his jaw fallen. Only one person noticed him in the bustle that ensued as the rector, who had paused to listen, now left the dinner-table accompanied by his son.

‘ What is wrong, *mon ami*? You are not yourself,’ whispered madame, bending across Dr. Butler’s empty seat.

‘ It’s all wrong,’ groaned Ratcliffe, in a savage whisper. ‘ Let us get home early this evening. You thought yourself mighty clever, Suzanne, but you have been hoodwinked ; and I—I feel now——’

His head dropped on his chest.

The young people, even Anne, were all excited and eager, wondering and asking each other questions which no one could answer. Ratcliffe was unobserved except for the companion who knew most of his past and much of his present life, and he felt strangely guilty.

‘Drink some more wine.’

Madame herself poured out the claret with a firm plump hand, while her steadfast glance seemed to convey some of her own undaunted courage to revive the drooping spirit of her fellow-conspirator.

Presently the rector resumed his place at table and his carving of the goose. He gave them the intelligence that the suffering man was indeed Jim Lee, who was insensible from a blow on the head, but was now being carefully tended. How the mischief occurred had not yet transpired.

They had a poor game of whist later on, Ratcliffe revoking twice, for his hunting fall had affected his head sadly.

As early as was decently possible Madame Dupré rose with a dignified air, and intimated to Miss Jennings that as the *Capitaine* seemed unwell they would say good-night.

‘Poor dear Uncle Pierce!’ Lucy reproached herself in quite a lively manner for not having perceived how out of sorts he had been that evening.

Outside in the darkness Dick had found Bay Ronald fidgetting at the gate and pawing a grave for his ill-temper with his hoofs. Quieting the horse and mounting, the young man rode slowly along with the reins lying loosely on his favourite’s neck.

Dick was lost in reverie. One minute

he would be recalling the meeting in the lighted church, and Lucy's rapturous kisses after their late, it seemed so long, separation, (they were still warm on his lips!) then he felt the confiding clasp of her hands upon his shoulder as she looked up into his face, to be quite sure her dear Dick had not changed during absence. Again he would picture their mutual start on seeing Captain Ratcliffe's figure, in green coat and steel buttons, appearing from behind the font. Also the captain's gloomy face, his sadness rather than anger while he surveyed the young couple; his deep-drawn sighs while promising to think the matter over. Did all bode well or ill for Dick's own and Lucy's future? Hope on the whole prevailed in Dick's heart, flickering into ever more steady glow. And so there was light in his mind though the grassy lane along which he was riding was

pitchy dark, albeit overhead some stars began to show.

‘ *Hullo ! !* ’

Saxby suddenly roused to find himself uttering this mental exclamation, if indeed his bodily lips did not frame it. He had been startled from dreaming by the behaviour of his horse.

Bay Ronald was snorting, curving his neck ; and, while slackening his pace in evident distrust, was staring straight at some apparent object before him, where Dick could descry nothing in the shadows.

‘ All right, young un, what’s the matter? There is nothing there. Come on.’

In spite of his master’s soothing voice and persuasions, the horse now stopped short. Even a touch of Dick’s spurs did not persuade him to move.

Was there nothing there, indeed? It was the old story of Balaam and his ass.

Something, surely dangerous, lay upon the ground, faintly discernible to the bright equine eye that intelligently regarded it ; but to this, Dick, like the prophet of old, was blind. He touched Bay Ronald again rather more sharply with the spurs than the latter was used to.

‘ Come on, I say. No fooling. I tell you there is nothing there.’

As Dick spoke aloud, a dark figure that lurked crouching in a black patch of shadow thrown by a thorn-bush came creeping forward, bent to the double. Just beside the horse’s neck the skulking foe rose suddenly from all fours to full height. A man’s hand caught the bridle, and a voice hissed out a fearful imprecation in hoarse, passionate accents,

‘ . . . you blackhearted rascal, I’ll——’

‘ Hands off, there ! Let go, I tell you.’

Next instant, as the fellow did not obey

at once, down came Dick's hunting-crop on the foot-pad's head in a blow given with the full force of his vigorous young arm. It was a crushing one, for Dick was in splendid training, and wide awake now to the fact that this attack meant highway robbery or perhaps worse. At the same moment he heard three or four low calls of intelligence interchanged rapidly on either side of the lane in the darkness. Dick recognised in momentary bewilderment that here were several foes to be reckoned with.

Bay Ronald knew the same; saw likewise his own chance of escape at that moment. His rider had lowered his left hand involuntarily while bending over to the right to strike with all his might, thus leaving the reins momentarily slack. Startled by the swishing blow, the bay swerved violently to one side of the

grassy lane, dragging his bridle clear with a jerk out of the attacker's grasp. The man's hold was enfeebled, for with a groan he staggered back. Facing the bank Bay Ronald clambered up it as cleverly as a cat, balanced himself for one moment, the next he had cleared well the wide-water ditch that lay beneath him in the gloom on the other side.

Almost before Dick could realise the situation, his horse, taking the bit between his teeth, was galloping furiously across their own hill field. Maddened with fright he was tearing forward towards the five-barred gate at its further end. It was useless to think of stopping him; the gate was locked too, as Dick knew full well, the key hanging at that moment on a nail in his own den at home.

It must be taken, so the rider hardened his heart for a thundering fall. Not so.

Bay Ronald cocked his ears, and as they neared the dark obstacle—hopped over like a bird. Now they were in the paddock nearest Forge Farm, with the kitchen light burning in the darkness. As he saw his own stable roof looming ahead in a black gable cutting the twilight, the terrified bay for the first time slackened his speed. Then, yielding to the soothing expostulations of his master's voice, every inflection of which the intelligent animal seemed to know, Bay Ronald allowed Dick to pull him up a little way from the last gate of all, and so he walked into their own farm-yard as docile as a lamb.

Safe now, and realizing with a lively sense of gratitude his late escape, Dick shouted loudly. Out ran Giles with three or four other men who helped in the stable and on the farm. To these Saxby rapidly explained the situation, and leading the

horse into his stable in a trice master and men armed themselves with a revolver on Dick's part, a pitchfork on that of Giles, and sundry other weapons snatched up by the rest. ?

Seizing a lantern, the little posse of self-made constables hurried down the lane; but though they advanced warily and quickly, sending out skirmishers on either side, the enemy had fled, and the road was clear.

Not quite clear, however. For just at the spot where Bay Ronald had refused to proceed and full in the middle of the lane they found an unhinged gate laid flat on the ground, while near at hand close inspection with the lantern revealed some drops of blood. Dick's blow had taken sure effect.

The motive of the miscreants was plain. They hoped that the horse might plunge

into the bars of the gate ; if so, they could have seized his rider at a disadvantage, who would probably have been unseated. It was one of Dick's own gates, and freshly painted white last summer. Thanks to this instance of his master's carefulness, Bay Ronald was enabled to perceive its outline, even although the lane just there seemed black as pitch.

Once they were all returned to the farmyard, Dick's first thought was to busy himself with the care of his horse. Setting Giles and the other men to rub down Bay Ronald, Dick also lent a hand, and he did not cease his exertions till his favourite's glossy skin equalled in brightness the full dark eye turned expressively on his master.

'You have saved my life, old chap,' whispered Dick in the bay's ears, as he gently rubbed them ; 'you have indeed, and I'll not forget it to you.'

That night unusual precautions were taken at the Forge farmyard in fastening up all for the night. Ever since Dick suspected the smugglers of having borrowed his colt, that was supposed pixie-ridden, he had made bolts and locks more sure. Better still, the yard was guarded by two savage, half-bred bull-dogs, and woe be-tide any luckless individuals, excepting those of the household, who should cross the brick-paved yard after dark.

Then at last Dick went in to the farm to soothe his mother's eager enquiries, and obey her urgings to rest himself, change his clothes, and enjoy his supper. But only after the latter meal did Dick recount the incident of the evening. He was smoking by the parlour fireside, and told the tale so quietly that Catherine was less alarmed than might otherwise have been the case ; for, like many women of great

personal courage, she felt more frightened for others, even her stalwart son, than she would for herself.

‘But can you explain it, my boy? It is a new thing to have highway robbery in our quiet neighbourhood.’

‘Quiet!’ echoed Dick, with a grin, ‘when there are smugglers thick around us, mother. We know that the Hawkhurst gang has been thirty strong for the last two winters. Don’t you know that last week, going along by Badger’s Hill, some five or six respectable farmers riding home from market in the evening met a party with blackened faces, and they—the farmers, I mean—were simply ordered by the smugglers to stand aside and dared to interfere with them.’

‘True. But this is more like some private grievance. Did you not say, my son, that the man called you a rascal?’

‘That is so,’ said Dick, puffing thoughtfully. ‘Well, mother, all I can tell you is that on my honour my conscience is clear of all offences towards my neighbours. That is excepting such daily matters as I hope I do repent of every Sunday. I have done nothing to make any man harbour a deep grudge against me, except he be Weasel Joey or some such vagabond.’

‘God bless you, my son!’ uttered Catherine, fervently.

Towards two o’clock that night the bulldogs must have given the alarm in the farm-yard, for such a chorus of yelping and barking as arose from all the other dogs, Dick’s pointer and terriers, and the bob-tailed sheep-dog, would have aroused the Seven Sleepers.

Dick sprang out of bed—unslung his gun, which he had left ready loaded, from the wall—and popped his head out of

a window that overlooked the stables. His four-footed guard, however, had fulfilled their task well ; for the canine chorus decreased as if the enemy were retiring. Partly dressing himself, Dick stole downstairs, only to find his mother herself already up and looking to the bolts of windows and doors with a coolness perhaps hereditary from her fighting ancestors. Commending her pluck, he went outside himself and listened ; then supposed the alarm had been a false one.

The bull-dogs slouched up and sniffed affectionately at his hand. All was still.

CHAPTER XVI.

IT was the last day's meet with the hounds for the season. During a week past there had fallen heavy rains, so that the low-lying country was spongy, and the Kent hop-gardens were very quagmires of sticky soil. On the preceding evening, however, the wind had changed round to the north, and now the air was brisk and clear again.

How bright and sunny was the morning about half-past eight as our friend Dick jogged down the London coach-road! He was riding Bay Ronald, who looked cleverer and handsomer than ever with his delicate ears pricked and his coat shin-

ing like satin as he stepped along, knowing full well the glad sport on which they were bound this day.

The meet was to be at Buckhurst Spinney, which lay a good many miles away from the Forge Farm. Hoar-frost was lingering in the shadows of the long, coarse grass and rushes as they neared the low-lying district of boggy country which was their goal. Before reaching this point, however, Bay Ronald pricked his ears with every sign of joy, having noticed even at a considerable distance some black-capped heads bobbing behind the hedge of a lane which presently joined their own road. These belonged to Squire Falconer himself and his whips.

Though the hounds were not yet visible, Bay Ronald trembled with delight, and trotted forward jauntily to the cross-roads, where he was gladdened by their sight.

The good M.F.H. answered Dick's joyous 'Halloa' in stentorian tones. He and his hunt servants were riding very smart nags with tails docked to a few inches; but here ended the smartness, as far as exterior appearances went, in the Master's own turnout. Falconer's well-worn hunting-coat had little to boast of over the stained scarlet frocks of his whips. However, that gentleman prided himself on sportsmanlike qualities, and not upon the cut of his tailor.

'Glad to see *you're* in time, my boy, though a doosid late hour this is,' he began, grumbling good-humouredly, as Dick shoved alongside. 'But this precious generation of boys now-a-days is so confoundedly effeminate. Demme, sir, my father always used to be up for hunting before daylight. Why, fifty years ago, they would turn out at five o'clock. I'd

do the same like a shot, but, hang it! I might hunt by myself if I did.'

Dick laughed at his good friend, and declared his own willingness to be up as soon as he could see to ride without mistaking a stile for a gate. Then they both began discoursing about the hounds; Falconer enlarging proudly upon the various fine points and qualities of his favourites who, for their part, as they looked up at him with eager faces and waving sterns, knew and loved every note of his voice. There were over twenty couple of the beauties. Fine, muscular hounds they were, with great breadth across the loins.

'Ah! look at them,' said Falconer enthusiastically. 'They are a nice level lot, aren't they? And it was all owing to your father, my boy, they are so good. Before George Hasledene was master, old Sir William Devereux used to hunt the

country with a queerly mixed pack. He was a fine old man, good magistrate and a sound Tory, but he didn't much care if the game was hare or fox. That was twenty years ago. However, Hasledene had been used to the best hunting,—you see he was a flyer, was your father,—and so he taught us down in this part how things should be done.'

Be it said with all respect to our worthy Squire Falconer that now-a-days his way of, 'how things should be done,' could by no means be thought faultless; and likewise the pace of both hounds and horses would be voted slow. To such carping and criticism he would have replied that he went out to hunt, and not merely to gallop at a breakneck pace across country. That might suit a party of wild Oxonians eager for a lark, and ready to race for a distant steeple straight across hedges and

ditches; but Falconer was too old a sportsman for such boyish diversion, and the great pleasure of hunting to him was to watch his hounds drawing up to their game on a cold scent. Nevertheless, he was a hard rider, but used great judgment and prudence, never risking more than was necessary.

‘I am too heavy for foolishness, Dick,’ he remarked confidentially to his companion this very morning. ‘Now, Ratcliffe is different. He hasn’t got much weight on his bones to carry; and a sailor on horseback is always rash, if even he rides for years. Here he comes, driving that pretty niece of his in a gig. Never saw old Rat turn out on wheels before. He *must* have been badly shaken the other day.’

Dick’s bright morning face took a shining noonday expression as they neared the

high-road by Buckhurst Spinney. There truly enough, among a varied assemblage of other vehicles besides a mounted crowd of gentlemen, farmers and officers from the nearest barracks, was a small gig with what Falconer pronounced 'a devilish clever mare' in the shafts, and pretty Lucy sitting beside her uncle. Dick's sunshine was obscured, however, as he noticed that the rival Richard was before him. His cousin Richie, who had driven over from Rookhurst House in a dog-cart, sending his horses on under the care of his grooms, had now mounted, and was grimacing and showing off on Miss Jennings' side of the aforesaid gig.

'Confound the monkeyfied fellow! Why can't he ride to a meet like the rest of us? Wanted to stay in bed and drink his chocolate later, I suppose,' muttered Squire Falconer in disgust.

‘He’s got a fine horse, sir, though,’ put in Dick, eagerly. ‘That’s the very brown hunter that he paid five hundred guineas for, as I hear. He told Bill Butler he meant to show us all the way, especially myself once he did come out.’

Richie was indeed riding a fine animal. This was a short-legged, powerful, dark horse, with considerable depth of chest, a long lean head, beautifully set on a muscular neck, and a bright intelligent eye.

‘Egad! that’s a good horse, indeed,’ ejaculated the squire, slapping his thigh.

‘It is, but I don’t believe he can *ride* it,’ answered Dick, with such flat jealousy that a shrewd smile twinkled on old Falconer’s ruddy, jovial visage.

The latter now trotted forward with the hounds to see to *his* part of the day’s business. Dick felt that his own lay beside yonder gig to begin with. He brought

Ronald, fretting mightily at being separated for a short time from his beloved friends, the hounds, up as near the divinity's throne on wheels as the bay could be coaxed.

Lucy looked simply bewitching in a beaver bonnet framing her arch face, sunny eyes, and tiny coral mouth. It was such a little mouth that Dick often found himself wondering, as he had done in boyhood, how it was of any manner of use for such daily purposes as eating or drinking. As to speech, one might have fancied only small words, and those of the prettiest, could have passed its rosy portals. Although Lucy was so radiant a companion, her weather-beaten guardian seemed short in his temper this morning; for on Dick's joyous, yet humble salutation, as became a properly modest lover, none too sure of favour from his lady-

love's uncle, Ratcliffe answered curtly, rapping out an oath, at being penned in a box on wheels on such a lovely morning. The best meet of the season, too! Then he flicked angrily at his mare, so that Bay Ronald started to one side, and required some judicious soothing and petting to coax his highness again into anything like equanimity.

Dick dropped into the background, being certain that a hint was intended. The honest fellow would have felt very sore, for his hopes had been greatly raised by the captain's relenting manner on Candlemas Day; but Lucy consoled him by shooting the most melting of glances from under her long black lashes, while a faint quiver of disappointment might have been noticed by a very sharp observer, causing her under-lip to tremble. It was a slightly pouting, delicious under-lip at

all times, one that looked as if 'a bee had newly stung it.' Ratcliffe did not see his niece's message of peace, thanks to her large bonnet; but Richie Saxby did, and that young fellow's face flushed unpleasantly and took a sullen expression at the sight.

The ground was marshy for some distance below Buckhurst Spinney, and as the hounds followed their huntsman to the latter spot they sank into the spongy surface, showing their length from hip to hock. There were no more capital quarters for any fox to choose, as far as food and comfort went, for there were plenty of scattered tussocks of rough grass rising high and dry where he could make a warm bed; also ducks and moorhens were to be got conveniently near, besides such small deer as water-rats and mice. So one fox, it seemed, had thought overnight,

for as Falconer took his hounds towards the cover of gorse and low trees that lay one hundred yards away, two of the pack began quietly sniffing and drawing at some low-lying alder clumps. Suddenly old Ranter put his nose up into the air, with eager enquiry ; then, determined by a stronger whiff of the, to him, delicious aroma, he and Gameboy followed it from the bog to a thick gorse patch that lay outside the spinney itself. After some more sniffing and investigation, Ranter gave tongue loudly and dashed into the cover, while Gameboy followed his example, which was speedily caught up by the rest of the pack.

To come back for a minute to Dick, in whose doings, with those of Bay Ronald, we are principally interested. That equine youngster was given to impatience as yet, while waiting about at meets, until the de-

lightful sport, that warmed his heart's cockles and sent the blood boiling frantically through his veins, had fairly begun. Before the hounds found, he invariably kept reaching at his bridle in an irritable manner, all his muscles quivering under his satin skin : but the instant he knew, as now on this day, that they were off and meant going he and his master were at once on the best of terms and thoroughly understood each other.

The gorse patch was a small one, and the fox was bold. When the latter found himself so rudely startled from the undisturbed possession of his favourite haunt, he at once bethought himself with sagacity that the truest safety was to be found in the hills that lay far off, beyond the low-lying country. Hills that were well covered with coppice and woodland, that had craggy places too, as he well knew,

with many a snug, deep hole where he would lie safe in the dark and laugh at his pursuers.

'Twas a hardy venture, for eight long miles of enclosed country lay before him to be traversed; but he resolved to dare the feat or die in the attempt. Away the hounds raced over the boggy outskirts of the marsh; whilst behind them the horses and their riders were settling down to real business. Dick was fairly favoured by fortune when the fox broke, for, thanks to Bay Ronald's fretting, he had taken the latter to a quiet corner of the spinney. Now he looked out of the tail of his eye for his rival.

But Richie had also got away well with the first flight, and was sailing easily over the open country across which they were running; ground exactly suited to his new mount that had come fresh from the

shires and was not used to cramped fences. Now, however, a more cultivated and enclosed district lay ahead, over which the hounds were streaming without a check. From the first, Dick gladly guessed they were in for a real good thing.

The pace was tremendous, that is, for those days ; and only some few of the field who were really mounted on first-rate horses had a chance. Dick's heart was filled with impassioned delight as they raced along, tearing over the ground, hoof stroke upon stroke. Oh ! those were golden minutes, full of the wild joy of living ; they passed like the fresh wind blowing upon his cheek, passed and were gone for evermore. Pasture after pasture was left behind as they galloped on. Fence after fence Bay Ronald took in his stride, and now, as Dick's keen blue eyes looked straight ahead across the level landscape,

the wooded slopes of the hills yonder were beginning to seem already near.

Just then Dick became unpleasantly aware that some one was galloping too close behind. Throwing a rapid glance over his shoulder he saw Richie's flushed face watching himself, Dick, with so fixed and venomous a glare, it gave our hero a nasty thrill down his spine. Some three fields back Richie had turned aside from a rather desperate bullfinch through which Bay Ronald poked his way; but already, thanks to the speed of his animal, the master of Rookhurst was creeping up to his rival. The tenant of Forge Farm had been choosing his own line without a thought that anyone was following him. Now he had almost a mind to call out to his landlord to be careful, but checked the impulse.

‘ Hang the fellow ! Does he want to

ride over me?' was Dick's inward query, remembering the lowering look of ill-will shot by his cousin across the splash-board of Rat's gig.

With a savage joy the poorer man of the two recognised they were deadly rivals, and that his wealthy namesake would not hate him as Dick felt assured the latter did, without good cause for such envy. So he held his peace with a satisfied belief that, at all events, Bay Ronald was not likely to make a mistake and thus give Richie the chance of jumping upon a fallen foe. And they rode on.

The hounds had now been running without a check for some five-and-twenty minutes, and Dick could feel his horse, though going strongly under him, yet giving short gasps for breath every now and then. And still Richie's brown Star-

light kept alongside, or slightly behind, and still Dick felt that the man riding so jealously near him was an enemy.

On ! on ! The thud of their galloping hoof-beats still kept sounding in each other's ears.

On ! on ! nearer to the hills ahead. And now they have come into a slightly new aspect of country where there are more homesteads and villages, approached by long, grassy lanes bordered with hedges on either side as dense as small forests.

Presently one of these latter hedges showed ahead, which, as Dick's practised eye saw at a glance, was quite unjumpable. Up and down its absolutely wooded length there was only one opening to be descried. And this latter was protected by three rails with strong posts that showed little promise of yielding. That or nothing was the spot !

So Dick pulled his horse into a trot on nearing it with a cheery, 'Come up, young un,' by way of encouragement.

Just then, and only a few yards away from the posts, there was a sudden rush. Richie had dug in his spurs, and passing Dick crossed him, smashing into the rails. Poor Starlight, which had already shown signs of distress, did not rise, and hitting the rails hard, turned a complete somersault. Next moment a confused mass of scarlet and brown was rolling over and over in the wintry, wet grass that bordered the lane. Immediately after Bay Ronald rose in the air!

Dick had not dared check his horse, they were so close on the posts.

'Hallo! well done!'

They were over safe and sound, by all that was glorious! Seeing the fallen rider below him, the bay horse actually twisted

in his jump and landed cleverly the next instant clear of the prostrate man.

‘ Well done, you beauty !’ repeated Dick, enthusiastically, patting his favourite’s neck as he pulled up. The good fellow was honestly glad that he had not dashed out his cousin’s brains, though with a shrewd suspicion that Richie would not have returned the compliment, had he, Dick, been lying in an equally dazed condition on the roadside. (‘ It doesn’t do for a fellow to harbour such thoughts as those. There’s plenty of the devil in us all if we allow him to show his ugly horns.’)

Thus reflecting, Dick got off his horse and lifted up his fallen rival, administering a pull from a flask that Mrs. Saxby’s own hands had filled that morning. This was apparently too mild, for Richie made a wry face and muttering, ‘ Water and gin,’ asked for his own pocket pistol containing French

brandy. Dick now busied himself with the brown horse which wanted pulling together and lifting up as much as its master. Both indeed looked sadly shaken and sorry for themselves, and were presenting a very dismal appearance when the sound of wheels close by reached the ears of the group. Next minute, by all that was wonderful! who should drive up but Captain Ratcliffe and Lucy? their gig splashed with mud and the wicked-looking mare flecked with foam. Clearly if the captain could no longer ride, at least he knew his way about the Kentish lanes and did not spare the whip. A few brief exclamations and explanations followed.

‘My horse fell *there*,’ vouchsafed Richie, with a hang-dog look, as he limped up to the side of the gig. ‘That brute of mine, that I gave a whole pot of money for, must

needs try to break my neck. And Dick Saxby very nearly did his best to jump upon me afterwards.'

(Dick was just then a few steps away, seeing to the backbiter's saddle, so did not catch this muttered piece of malice.)

'O, Mr. Saxby,' returned Lucy, shocked, indignation sparkling in her eyes, 'I am sure you must mean that he tried *not* to jump upon you.'

'We saw what happened,' put in Rat, meaningly. 'We were on the road there, and had a full view of you both galloping down to the hedge.'

Richie was silenced, for there was a tone about Ratcliffe that he told himself he did not like, 'and wouldn't stand, by Jove!'

'Anyhow, I am badly hurt. Can you give me a lift back?' he asked, dolorously.

‘There’s a hedge-cutter down there who, I daresay, will bring this wretched screw of mine home.’

‘All right! get in and sit bodkin. Luckily you don’t take much room,’ said Rat, with a surliness of manner this proverbial time-server knew was foolish, but could not help for the life of him.

Lucy guessed her uncle’s feelings, and laughed in her heart. Poor Dick, who came up just then, could not understand why she looked so radiant. He only saw that Richie was sitting close beside her. It never struck him his dear girl was telling herself that now, now, Uncle Pierce would surely see the difference between the two young men—one gilded, the other golden. How gallant was Dick! how splendidly he had taken that fence! and how noble of him not to hint by word or look that Richie had crossed him pur-

posely. Upon Lucy's word if Dick had jumped upon his cousin, the latter would have got richly his deserts!

Bless your heart, pretty Lucy! Uncle Pierce did not need telling. Old villain though he was in some respects, he yet almost loved Dick like a son as his grey eyes rested reluctantly on the young man's handsome, crestfallen face.

'You're a man, *you* are!' he thought to himself, and therewith dug his elbow into Richie's ribs quite crossly. It would have given the grizzled veteran real pleasure to turn his unwished-for companion out neck and crop. But there! it is a treat to the soul to despise openly a rich or powerful neighbour, and in such a luxury Pierce Ratcliffe had not indulged himself this many a long year.

The hounds by this time were far away, only a few stragglers being left in sight,

struggling on after the main pack, panting and exhausted. Dick looked in vain over the hedge and towards the hills with a big sigh.

‘I suppose I ought to thank you,’ was Richie’s farewell at parting.

‘Don’t trouble,’ returned Dick, coolly. Thereupon, a labourer having relieved him of Starlight’s bridle, he turned Bay Ronald’s head, preparing to jog home.

It may here be said that the game fox did reach in the end the harbour of refuge for which he had so pluckily crossed the open. After his eight miles’ run, weary and draggletailed, he gained at last the earths among the rocks he knew from his earliest infancy, where no hound could get at him, for the runs in the sides of the hills were endless. He was a gallant fox and well deserved his safety;

and if he thought for a moment, with a sigh, of a half-eaten cold duck hidden away in his late larder at Buckhurst Spinney, let us hope that a good supper in the shape of a tender young rabbit rewarded him in the still hours of that night for his daring and speed.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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